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Research Centre**



# **A Framework for Irregular Warfare**

**Prepared by the Australian Army Research Centre**

**Irregular Warfare Essay Collection**



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Research Centre**

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## Foreword

The Australian soldier has a well-earned reputation for expertise in counter-insurgency. Perhaps this reputation is born from Australia's experience of the Malayan Emergency, the Borneo Confrontation or the Vietnam War; and it was probably sustained through United Nations deployments as peacekeepers within generally fractured societies. Regardless of its genesis, this collection of papers responds to this tradition, by focussing academic inquiry into the irregular form of warfare. Examination of historical and contemporary conflict, aims to inform further professional inquiry about how irregular conflicts might manifest in the future.

This inquiry is important. Over the last few years, major irregular conflicts have included the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, both of which demonstrated a highly interconnected nature through Middle Eastern and global competition.<sup>1</sup> The Afghan conflict smouldered with the rise of the Islamic States' Khorasan Province, before growing to the runaway bushfire that was its final phase. The civil war in the Congo continues and has now claimed the inauspicious title of the war involving the most casualties since World War II. Russian-sponsored irregulars continue to foment insurgency in the Donbas and expanded their influence in the ongoing Libyan civil war and the Venezuelan uprising. Illicit economies continue to destabilise the writ of the nation-state in Mexico, Honduras, Jamaica and Somalia, creating levels of violence that far surpass that of criminality and, indeed, that of many wars. Competition between Pakistan and India continues to be fought with insurgents and terror actions, such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba raid into Mumbai in 2008. And we have also seen the echoes of Arab Spring protests in movements spanning Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Belarus.

What these conflicts share in common is the role of the non-state actor—people not belonging to the uniformed armed forces of a nation-state. Many are civilians who have self-mobilised to a cause and have learned the trade of warfighting while immersed in conflict. Consequently, many have seen significant violence, experienced trauma and suffered atrocities. Many of these people are being exploited for the purposes of major power competition in a zero-sum game where simply blocking a sponsor's military objectives serves to address one's own strategic agenda. For a nation that values the global rules-based order, this frequency of irregular war portends the ongoing erosion of Max Weber's notion of a state holding a monopoly on the use of force.

In this context, the relative absence of discourse involving irregular forces must be addressed. The Australian Army prepares for peace and war, but in war one does not have the luxury of deciding how the adversary will choose to pursue their strategic ends. A 'hybrid' character of regular, irregular and cyberspace actors will undoubtedly be evident in future conflict; as will the acceleration of adapting new technologies, at the speed of social media. War will be broadcast in real time, laced with disinformation, onto the devices of the Australian citizen, who will judge its efficacy and moral righteousness.

This publication addresses this gap. These essays published here were selected to provide a breadth of perspectives across case studies, personal experiences and theories of Irregular Warfare, provided by emergent leaders of our future Defence Force.

2021 Chief of Army Scholar, Andrew Maher introduces the concept of Irregular Warfare in the opening chapter, framing the essays that follow. Chris Webb expands on this foundation by examining insurgency in Southern Thailand, where the influence of Buddhist and Islamist narratives collide. Brooke Barling then compares and contrasts irregular conflicts in Mozambique and Rhodesia from the 1960s through to the 1990s, drawing lessons to advance the theory of Irregular Warfare. Clarence Hovell examines the Tunisian revolution, drawing out common elements despite 60-year intervening period. Finally, Steph Costa takes a gendered lens to violence in the Sudan, demonstrating that it is not enough to understand 'why men rebel'; irregular violence can be significantly shaped by the experience of women in society.

Army is committed to generating a workforce of dynamic, creative thinkers who can challenge the status quo, make new connections and apply their knowledge across disciplines to real-world problems. By raising the level of professional debate, this collection contributes to this objective by charting a trajectory for the reinvigoration of Australian Army's expertise in Irregular Warfare. If it stimulates further professional discourse and study on the topic then it will have ably achieved this aim.

**Brigadier Ian Langford DSC and Bars**

Director General Future Land Warfare

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## Endnote

- 1 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, at: <https://www.acleddata.com/> (accessed 25 January 2019).

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# Theorising Rebellion: A Framework for Irregular Warfare

**Andrew Maher**

Australia has a long history with insurgency and considers its experience in Phuoc Tuy, Vietnam and Uruzghan, Afghanistan, as examples evidencing a reputation as a world leader in this space. An innate capability for insurgency and irregular warfare would seem logical given the frequency of insurgency in our region; almost all South-East Asian nations have experienced insurgency since World War II.<sup>1</sup> Despite this context and recent operational experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, to uncritically assert that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is a world leader in countering insurgency is dogma that is unhelpful.<sup>2</sup>

The Defence Strategic Update (DSU) 2020 pivots the ADF from such operations. A common refrain is that it directs away from what some have termed the ‘distraction’ of the post-9/11 era and towards preparation for major combat operations.<sup>3</sup> This is an incomplete narrative. The Cold War era demonstrated that major power competition manifests in the ungoverned and under-governed fringes; the proxy conflicts that manifest through support to irregular groups ranging from the Viet Minh to the Provisional Irish Republican Army. The reality is that we need to be able to respond across the spectrum of conflict.

Today, irregular competitions ‘remain and are expanding’.<sup>4</sup> The Pashtun insurgency came to its fateful conclusion in August 2021; al-Qaeda has been degraded but not defeated, with affiliates now stretching from the Philippines to West Africa; the Syrian Civil War approaches a decade in duration, with no end in sight; post-Cold War popular revolutions

characterised as ‘Colour Revolutions’ were recently seen in Venezuela and Belarus; Russia continues to leverage private military companies, outlaw motorcycle gangs and the ‘Novorussia’ narrative to leverage Russian-speaking minorities in pursuit of Russian strategic objectives in the Ukraine and elsewhere; and China leverages its Maritime Militia and State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) to advance national interests.<sup>5</sup> Rather than being ‘distracted’, the ADF learned prescient lessons over its past two decades of fighting non-state armed groups. The very efficacy of such groups in exhausting Western powers points to the leverage that can be generated through state sponsorship of proxies. Such lessons must therefore now be organised into new thinking about Irregular Warfare in today’s digital age.

This essay seeks to codify such lessons in order to reinvigorate Australian strategic thinking about the challenges of Irregular Warfare—the first shots towards expanding thinking about today’s challenges. In this essay, I firstly introduce a broad framework for understanding Irregular Warfare, before articulating a theory for examining the facets of irregular conflicts—a model termed the ‘Triangle of Rebellion’. This theory is then applied to the example of foreign fighter mobilisation in North Africa to practically illuminate how the Triangle of Rebellion might assist policymakers in understanding irregular challenges.

## **Introduction—A Framework for Irregular Warfare**

Analysis of Irregular Warfare is complicated by language. The term implies infrequency, and perhaps then being of marginal interest to the military practitioner. This view is incorrect: indeed, David Kilcullen argued almost a decade ago that the exact opposite is true. Of 464 conflicts in the *Correlates of War* database from 1815 to 2010, 385 might be classified as irregular conflicts, making it the most frequent form of conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Irregular War is better described by firstly describing regular war — *war conducted by regulation*.<sup>7</sup> The regulations we mean are those of the Treaties of Westphalia that underpin our conceptions of the central role of the nation-state in international affairs and the Weberian norm of states’ rights to a monopoly of violence within their territory.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Irregular Warfare is that which is conducted outside the regulations of international

relations. This definition centres upon the employment of violence by non-state armed groups, and therefore incorporates groups that might be termed terrorists, guerrillas, revolutionaries, insurgents, militias and *Mafiosi*. Furthermore, this definition illuminates the importance of irregular actors; they erode the Westphalian norms that underpin the rules-based global order.

Doctrinally, the US military defines Irregular Warfare as ‘a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations’.<sup>9</sup> The keyword *struggle* points towards this form of warfare being a contest, amplified by the words *legitimacy* and *influence*, where the contest is for the people rather than for terrain. In recent years, the lazy lexicon of *terrorism* has degraded our focus on governance and the representation of a target population, to instead seeing a targeting problem. In so doing, it has desensitised Western militaries to the root causes of violence that exist within a population. This terrorism lexicon has in turn resulted in repeated Western surprise at Salafi-jihadist insurgent mobilisation, from Jemaah Islamiyah striking in Bali to Islamic State winning Mosul.<sup>10</sup> This idea that we might reconceive all forms of non-state actor radicalisation, including that of terror, through the lens of irregular mobilisation is an important reframing of the problem that was noted by Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko’s study of the 19th century Russian terrorist group, *Narodnaya Volya* (People’s Will).

*It is possible that the mechanisms of political radicalisation identified here may be general mechanisms of collective action, operating not just in mobilising for political conflict but for any kind of collective mobilisation in which self-interest is lost in or joined with some larger group or cause.*<sup>11</sup>

Mobilisation of irregular groups occurs through a structural framework of an underground, an auxiliary, a public component and an armed component. The armed component might be considered the cells which perpetrate terrorist acts. The public component is that which engages in overt politics, an example being the public services components and the Lebanese politicians working for Hizbollah. The underground, the ‘support’ elements of logistics, intelligence, command and control. The auxiliary, the part-time or co-opted support such groups draw to the cause. The ratio of these ‘support structures’—the underground, auxiliary and public components—to the armed component varies between 50:50 and 90:10 but support will generally be approximately 80 per cent of the organisation.<sup>12</sup>

The auxiliary has a low 'barrier to entry', often consisting of passive assistance. The underground requires active assistance. Thus, a hierarchical 'staircase' of increasing radicalisation to a cause is reflected through its structural components.<sup>13</sup>

The recognition of this structural fact highlights the incomplete nature of our current paradigm: why do we focus on the minority 20 per cent and not on the majority 80 per cent who provide the weapons, intelligence, indoctrination, training, safe-houses and propaganda that are needed for a 'terror' act that contributes to the insurgency? With this mindset and lexicon, I now continue by exploring the variables that influence *how* irregulars are mobilised and hypothesise a model I provisionally term the 'Triangle of Rebellion'. This hypothetical model affords insight into understanding how irregulars are energised by mobilising narratives.

## The Triangle of Rebellion Model

The origins of the Triangle of Rebellion model lie with the following quotation as a metaphor pertaining to the study of terrorism:

*[T]he researcher should not confuse his role. His role is not to 'fight' the terrorist fire; rather than a 'firefighter' he should be a 'student of combustion ...'*<sup>14</sup>

The model begins by using this analogy. The combustion triangle illuminates that a fire requires heat, fuel and oxygen within which it can exist and indeed, depending upon the ratio of the three variables, thrive. As firefighters well know, take away any one component of the triangle, and the fire may be suppressed. The combustion triangle and my hypothetical triangle of rebellion are shown pictorially below.

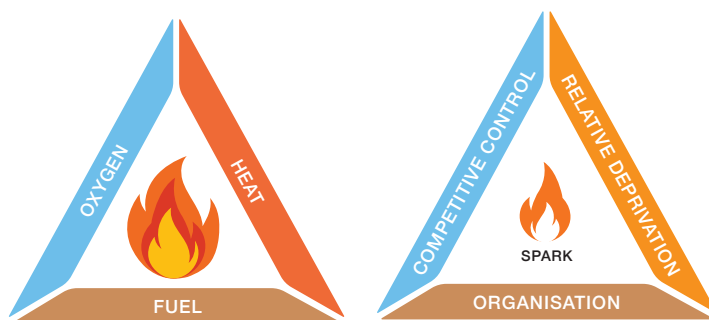


Figure 1: The Triangle of Rebellion model

*Relative deprivation* is the heat that sustains the rebellion; *organisation* is the fuel that sustains, directs and expands the cause; and *competition for control* over the population is the oxygen that sustains the flame of rebellion. A competition for control escalates a non-violent grievance into popularly supported violence, captures international media attention and sympathy, and serves to desensitise a population to violence. The spark of a suitable incident reverberates within the echo chamber of these pillars, intensifying pre-existing narratives into populist narratives that ignite rebellion. Akin to an oil refinery, the heat of an effective narrative carries aloft with the winds of hope, to ever increasing grades, those for whom that narrative resonates and those who believe that change is possible (as per Figure 2 below). At a low commitment threshold, there are those who acquiesce and thus turn a blind eye to the insurgent organisation in their midst—the phenomenon of a spiral of silence. At increasing commitment thresholds of belief, people join auxiliary and underground support networks, some rising to become those at a very high threshold, who radicalise to a suicidal commitment to the cause. Of note is that those radicalised to a suicidal commitment are the vast minority; a considerably larger number of those sympathetic to rebellion constitute the auxiliary and underground components, many of whom are likely to be reconcilable.<sup>15</sup> These components of the model will now be examined in turn.

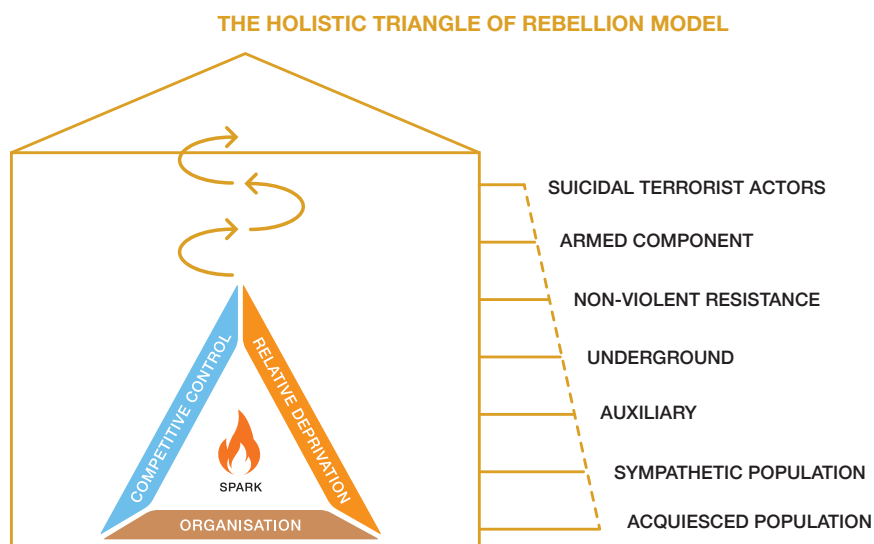


Figure 2: The holistic Triangle of Rebellion model

## Relative Deprivation

The Syrian-born Abu Ibrahim, who worked in Islamic State's intelligence offices in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, noticed that 'religion was not the main engine for most of the fighters he met, but desperation'.<sup>16</sup> Desperation was also a characteristic facet of James C. Scott's study of peasant rebellion in south-east Asia.<sup>17</sup> These ideas of desperation as a mobilising function — relative to a particular component to society — builds upon Ted Gurr's robust analysis in *Why Men Rebel*, and thus is viewed as a broadly applicable concept across Irregular Warfare.<sup>18</sup>

David Sterman and Nate Rosenblatt of New America found that:

*... fighters from North Africa were socioeconomically underprivileged and came from regions characterised by a lack of access to economic and political power ... [however], ISIS fighters from the Arabian Peninsula were relatively better off and came from regions with closer links to political elites.*<sup>19</sup>

Contrary to a popular narrative, terrorism is not a dynamic of poverty; Alan Krueger and Maleckova Jitka, for example, find that individuals with higher incomes and higher education levels are slightly more likely to join a terrorist group.<sup>20</sup> These findings highlight how different grievances exist, several of which can yield a radicalising effect.

The case of Belgian foreign fighters for Islamic State further illuminates that grievances are an insufficient reason to explain a mobilising dynamic. 'By March 2013 ... an estimated 70 Belgian youngsters were then said to be in Syria.'<sup>21</sup> Belgian-Moroccans are significantly overrepresented in this group, accounting for up to four-fifths of Belgium's foreign fighters.<sup>22</sup> For Belgian-Moroccan families, the gap between natives and immigrants (from outside the European Union) in terms of employment and education is higher than anywhere else in Europe, and they are therefore overrepresented in the lower rungs of most socio-economic categories (unemployment, housing, health, education).<sup>23</sup> That Belgian-Moroccans feel themselves unfairly ostracised by the Belgian community is a logical conclusion. Similar findings likewise characterise Dutch foreign fighters for Islamic State.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, 'the average fighter at the time of joining ISIS was 26 to 27 years old, single, had travelled to less than two foreign countries,

had the education equivalent of a high school degree'<sup>25</sup>—all variables which suggest a frustration with their limited opportunities compared to their expectations.

It is therefore key to note that Gurr's thesis argued that what mattered was *relative* deprivation, not *absolute* deprivation. Indeed, the interpretation of what form a deprivation may take, as shown in these examples, is inherently subjective—it might be simply a perceived lack of excitement or status, thereby motivating an individual to seek risky activities quite divorced from ideological considerations.<sup>26</sup>

## Organisation

Mobilising recruits requires an organisation which provides the strategy, propaganda, safe houses, transport, funding, weapons and intelligence needed to undertake operations. Such organisation takes time and energy to build, but also exposes the organisation to suppression by government security forces. In early phases, trust is essential. This recognition was examined in detail by Paul Staniland, who concluded his study of insurgent organisation by noting: 'Insurgent groups are built by mobilising pre-war politicized social networks'.<sup>27</sup>

Staniland found several different models of organisation that might be adopted depending on the broader environmental context.<sup>28</sup> In certain groups, such as Jemaah Islamiya, 'these relationships were formed predominantly through common attendance at madrassahs, mosques, and religious study groups ... and, later, through kinship ties'.<sup>29</sup> It has been identified not only that pre-conflict social groupings are key to establishing trusted networks essential to effective organisation but also that these friends are 'instrumental in the radicalisation process'.<sup>30</sup> In a similar manner, Aisha Ahmad in *Jihad & Co.: Black Markets and Islamist Power* identified the role played by businesses, particularly smuggling networks, in providing infrastructure (physical, logistical and funding) that supported Islamist proto-state formation by the Taliban, al-Shabaab and Daesh (or Islamic State).<sup>31</sup>

Organisational structure, local business loyalties and blunt financial calculations are all dynamic, evolving with a jihadist group's changing environment. Even small-scale protest has similar mobilisation requirements

to insurgency or terrorism; thus certain components of an organisational structure might be inherited by a mobilising insurgent group.

Organisation serves multiple ends. It attracts individuals with shared interests and worldviews and then provides the affiliation they desire, functioning as a virtuous cycle that addresses the relative deprivation felt by these individuals. Organisation also inherently provides undertakings with low commitment requirements, addressing the need for underground functions such as recruiting, propaganda or facilitation.<sup>32</sup> Organisation is also essential: resources must connect from suppliers to users.

Staniland's research on insurgent groups concludes by noting that 'patterns of violence, governance, and strategy are likely to be linked to insurgent organisation, [and therefore] strategy will work best if it is guided by the organisational structure of the insurgent group being targeted'.<sup>33</sup> Staniland's comment, in the context of this advanced model, could go further. Indeed, strategy formulation against any irregular armed group can be guided by understanding its organisational structure and its inherent strengths and weaknesses.

## **Competitive Control**

Competitive control is a term introduced by David Kilcullen that builds upon observations by Bernard Fall of the Viet Minh insurgency.<sup>34</sup> These writers note that a competition for control over a population is a key characteristic of irregular conflicts. The concept is expanded upon by David Galula's recognition that an insurgent organisation is typically a minority of the population, who compete for the allegiance of the ambivalent majority of the population.<sup>35</sup> Both sides thus seek to draw the allegiance of the ambivalent majority.

Rebellion against a strong authoritarian government is fragile and easily suppressed, particularly if the ambivalent majority report on insurgent activities. Conversely, if the government is weak, areas under its authority might be ungoverned or under-governed and insurgency can take root.<sup>36</sup> Rebels might compete effectively for the allegiance of the majority of the population, due to the absence of competition from a government. The idea of a contest of competitive control over a population directs attention to whether the Weberian norm of the monopolisation of physical force

exists, and also to the legitimacy to rule. Should the government lack such legitimacy, the situation is ripe for a competition of control. Legitimacy is expressed through the court of public opinion, and therefore might be self-diminished through the excessive use of coercive powers.<sup>37</sup>

Competition for control over a population might, as Louise Richardson identifies, be achieved via social factors, such as a ‘complicit surround’:

*Individuals in a community are exposed to a host of assumptions, conditions, and obligations that make supporting or joining a terrorist organisation appear either natural or unavoidable and which may include community acceptance of violent means.*<sup>38</sup>

The dynamic of complicit surround was highly evident in the methods ISIS employed to (successfully) exert control over its territories.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, a complicit surround, such as that in Kurdish-controlled regions of Iraq and Syria, might also serve to ‘firewall’ elements of society from Salafi narratives. This type of societal coercion is imperfect; risk-taking adolescents may choose to join certain external groups as a means to express rebellion against their parents and/or broader familial authority.

A competition for control may present as state-directed repression, as was seen during the Cold War, with challengers to that repression being groups such as Solidarity in Poland and Otpor! in Yugoslavia. Several studies support the notion of an inverted U-shaped curve in which communities that are significantly repressed and those with effective channels for alleviating deprivations (such as democracies) are least likely to experience insurgent violence.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it is notable that Solidarity and Otpor! manifested upon the weakening of the Soviet Union’s influence. The significantly repressed, or those experiencing severe deprivations, are too busy trying to survive, and violent rebellion is quickly crushed.<sup>41</sup>

Engaging in this competition, organised resistance takes on existing discontent and channels it against a form of authority. With these prerequisites, a ‘spiral of silence’ may manifest. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann introduced this term in 1974, drawing upon the recognition that ‘to the individual, not isolating himself is more important than his own judgement’.<sup>42</sup> Noelle-Neumann identifies that ‘the mass media have to be seen as creating public opinion: they provide the environmental pressure to which people respond with alacrity, or with acquiescence, or with silence’.<sup>43</sup>

Today, this includes social media.<sup>44</sup> A resistance organisation thereby seeks to present its case as the dominant opinion, encouraging the acquiescence of those with dissenting views. It may do so through intimidation, through leveraging online media to present a disproportionately frequent opinion, or through assassination of dissenting views—all of which feature heavily in the approach taken by Islamic State to establish control over Ar-Raqqa.<sup>45</sup>

This dynamic of a competition for control was closely observed within the area controlled by ISIS, despite Western expectations of imminent local rebellion during the period 2015–2017. Charlie Winter, writing for the Naval War College, noted that between 2014 and early 2017, ISIS worked to ‘inhibit access to the Internet, jam radio signals, and ban satellite dishes’.<sup>46</sup> Isolation of the population from alternative viewpoints served a virtuous cycle by negating competing narratives, reinforcing pro-ISIS narratives and mitigating adversarial intelligence penetration. This was a form of fabricating a complicit surround that snuffs out other competitors for control. All of these factors help to demonstrate why a popular uprising against ISIS never occurred, despite the relative deprivation felt by the population when comparing their existence to the expectation established by Islamic State narratives.

## The Popular Narrative and a Spark

A joint venture between United States Army Special Operations and John Hopkins University, Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies (ARIS), notes that ‘in isolation, narrative framing is unlikely to effectively mobilise without ... political opportunity and resource mobilisation’.<sup>47</sup> The spark of rebellion, an idea around which a narrative can coalesce, might be humiliation<sup>48</sup> or trauma—actual, cultural or psychological.<sup>49</sup> Such trauma can disengage social inhibitions towards violence, particularly if paired with broader grievances and a narrative that engages the individual emotionally.<sup>50</sup> These narratives are constructed from two key facets:

- a. **In-group/out-group dynamic.** Narratives help to form group identity due to reinforcement of shared values, motivations, history and identity. Such narratives ‘need to persuade their audiences of the necessity and effectiveness of taking collective action to address the challenges and grievances around which the group has mobilised’.<sup>51</sup> Collective action often deliberately leverages a low commitment

threshold, such as providing a financial donation or hiding weapons, in order to commit an individual to illegal group activities, from which commitment to the in-group then occurs.

- b. **A popular narrative.** Having established an in-group/out-group dynamic, narratives must continue to emphasise and reinforce the identity of the group to sustain control over its target population. 'Identity provides a reinforcing feedback loop for terrorism ... a symbolic act inspiring solidarity among those sharing interests with the terrorists.'<sup>52</sup> Initially, a terrorist act might be intended to reinforce this narrative, to highlight that some are willing to become martyrs to the cause, thus reinforcing the popular narrative.

Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko describe escalating radicalism as being contingent upon three mechanisms: 'an asymmetry in perception of harm, a shift from material prize to status and power prize, and a sunk-costs framing of the conflict. Together these mechanisms make each step in the escalation a reason to escalate further'<sup>53</sup>—a staircase of mobilisation. Sunk cost inhibits regression (or deradicalisation) when an individual has crossed the Rubicon of having engaged in politicised violent action or crime. Indeed, groups may deliberately require initiates to commit such acts as a formalising process in escalating radicalisation within the organisation. Summer Agan of ARIS therefore concludes, 'Narratives are crucial to understanding the behaviour of groups such as resistance movements'.<sup>54</sup>

The spark to a resonant narrative might be difficult to predict, yet it is nonetheless crucial to understanding the attraction of resistance movements and functions as a force multiplier.<sup>55</sup>

## Case Study—North African Foreign Fighters

**The case of Libyan foreign fighters demonstrates how relative deprivation can become self-fulfilling.** Libya recorded 18.8 per cent of the fighters in the Sinjar Records.<sup>56</sup> Darnah, Libya, with a population just over 80,000 compared to Riyadh's 4.3 million, 'stood out as largest per capita numbers of fighters'.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Libyan hometowns of the fighters from the Mediterranean seaboard (Darnah, Misrata, Sirte and Benghazi) collectively represent 93 per cent of the Libyan foreign fighters.<sup>58</sup> Of the Libyan total, 85.2 per cent were willing martyrs.<sup>59</sup> These statistics point towards concentrated geographic dissatisfaction being translated into

radicalisation, noting that these four towns very quickly became associated with the Libyan opposition to the Ghaddafi regime in early 2011. The seeds of dissatisfaction with the Ghaddafi regime in both Darnah and Benghazi originated in an uprising by Islamist organisations in the mid-1990s, particularly 'the Libyan Fighting Group (*jama'ah al-libiyah al-muqatilah*), [which] claimed to have Afghan veterans in its ranks'.<sup>60</sup>

More broadly, Ghaddafi's coup to seize power in 1969 ushered in a period of Arab nationalism which from 1975 onward saw increasingly extreme modes of repression. During Ghaddafi's rule, there were few avenues for political dissent, but also limited ability to organise an opposition. Protests beginning in February 2011 culminated with NATO intervention to support rebel forces. Perpetuation of the civil conflict thus serves to reinforce the conditions which cause relative deprivation among the local population. Indeed, among ISIS foreign fighters:

*... sixty-nine percent of Libyan fighters reported being underemployed; 32 percent reported being unemployed, working in agriculture or day labour, and 37 percent reported unskilled work or being students. Nineteen percent of the fighter contingent explicitly reported being unemployed.*<sup>61</sup>

Libyan fighter deprivations were therefore both a cause for and a function of the civil war. Eastern Libya suffered from higher underemployment, lesser political representation, poorer access to social services and poorer service provision than in Libya's west and Ghaddafi's tribal power base, thus creating a strong source of economic deprivation.<sup>62</sup> As Libya's GDP per capital contracted by almost half, the economy likewise contracted, pushing many Libyan government employees into unemployment.<sup>63</sup> Libya was in 2010 relatively wealthy, with a 'per capita GDP more than 2.7 times that of Algeria, the state with the next highest per capita GDP [in North Africa]'.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, this simultaneous cause and effect situation has also drawn fighters to the conflict: 'over the past seven years, 2,600–3,500 foreigners have joined or attempted to join jihadist groups in Libya'.<sup>65</sup>

It was in this context that Libyan militias were able to rapidly recruit, leveraging funds captured from state banks. 'Unsurprisingly, cronyism grew rampant. Competing officials in different ministries paid only those militias from their own towns, tribes, and regions', with parochial interests rapidly fragmenting society, taking tribal positions and generating new deprivations

among the population.<sup>66</sup> Salafi-jihadist organisations thus found fertile soil for their seeds to take root as cadres returned from fighting in Syria.

One such group, Ansar al-Sharia, that emerged from this chaotic environment was characterised by its organisation. In Benghazi, the group provided a program of charity and social services; it ‘repaired schools, swept the streets of garbage and distributed food, heaters, and blankets to the poor’.<sup>67</sup> Training camps were established to the south of Benghazi through which recruits, both local and foreign (Tunisians in particular), were funnelled. Once trained, Ansar al-Sharia quickly won a contest for the population of Benghazi through an assassination program that liquidated more than 13 ex-regime officials in July 2012 alone.<sup>68</sup>

**The case of Tunisian foreign fighters demonstrates how unresolved relative deprivation can shift its expression over time.** The cities of Kebili and Tunis were the second and third highest per capita recruiting pools for ISIS, followed by Bizerte (7th), Sidi Bouzid (9th), Ariana (11th), Sousse and Kasserine (13th and 14th respectively). These figures demonstrate the disproportionate recruitment sourced from Tunisia to Islamic State ranks; indeed, approximately 7,000 Tunisian foreign terrorist fighters are believed to have been mobilised to join the Islamic State.<sup>69</sup> The causal factor in this case seems to be the economically struggling neighbourhoods around the capital, Tunis, from which these fighters originated.<sup>70</sup> ‘These regions had also been active protest hubs during the Arab Spring, and some were recruiting grounds for previous jihadist conflicts.’ Indeed, in the post Arab Spring environment, ‘chronic underdevelopment of inland regions such as Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine has seen poverty, unemployment and illiteracy rates in these areas soar’, further contributing to a sense of relative deprivation in the face of soaring democratic optimism.<sup>71</sup>

The organisation of discontent in Tunisia drew upon:

*... the chaos of Libya [which] provided new networks with which Tunisian Salafist jihadists could connect and another route that fighters could take to Syria. It also provided an ungoverned space where Tunisian jihadist networks could maintain their activities as the Tunisian government began to crack down on groups like Ansar al-Sharia.*<sup>72</sup>

Similarly to the example of Libya, the organisation of political opposition to the Ben Ali regime was overwhelmed through electoral vote rigging and press censorship. Repression under the Ben Ali regime in the 1980s and early 1990s led to many jihadists being exiled to Europe, during which time a sizable number served in the Bosnian and Algerian wars.<sup>73</sup> Additional repression in the period 2013–2014 again served to shift the Salafist-jihadist problem elsewhere, notably to Libya.

The popular optimism felt upon the removal of the Ben Ali regime was instead replaced by disenchantment with a continued lack of progress on post-revolution economic and structural reforms.<sup>74</sup> The Tunisian case thus suggests the shifting manifestation of extreme frustration, as the anticipated remediation of relative deprivations in the post Arab Spring environment has failed to materialise.

**So what?** The dynamics witnessed in Libya and Tunisia became self-sustaining mechanisms. The proliferation of smartphones, expanding mobile phone connectivity, small unmanned systems, and man-portable lethality combined to both democratise and enable remote or proxy warfare that was leveraged by regional powers in the North African (and other) conflicts.<sup>75</sup> These means enhance the ability for patron states and transnational Salafi-jihadist groups to exploit discontent with the means to engage in violent acts. An irregular mobilisation dynamic can accelerate quickly, as it did in 2011, as the brakes of a global rules-based order fail to be applied by regional nations that are overcome by the zero-sum calculus of geopolitical competition.

## Conclusion

This article represents a first push into consideration of the complexity of future irregular war. Such consideration is essential if we are to prepare for the future; insights into which have already been provided by the conflicts of the post Arab Spring.

This article has sought to lay the foundation for ADF doctrine and, indeed, for understanding among the broader national security community. Specifically, I propose the Triangle of Rebellion model as a useful tool to inform analysis of irregular conflict and the mechanism that draws individuals towards non-state armed groups. The Triangle of Rebellion model forms

a baseline of analysis within which other papers within this Collection reframe the context and explore the underlying strategy applied by irregular groups. My introductory analysis has, by necessity of space and time, focused on Salafi-jihadist organisations. In time, further exploration of the theory advanced in this publication should include examination of Shi'a Islamic groups (such as Hizbollah<sup>76</sup>), Hindu and Sikh nationalist groups, and historical European groups (such as the anarchists and the People's Will). While further study needs to be done, the model presented here shows promise as being broadly applicable. With this baseline, the ADF might thus be prepared to understand, engage and prevail in future irregular conflicts.

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## Endnotes

- 1 These conflicts include Malaya (1948–1955), Indonesian Darul Islam (1958–1962), Indonesian East Timor (1975–2000), Indonesian Aceh (1976–2005), Papua New Guinea (1988–1998), Philippines Huk Rebellion (1946–1956), Philippines MNLF (1971–1996), Vietnam (1960–1975), Cambodia (1967–1975), Kampuchea (1978–1992), Laos (1959–1975) and the ongoing insurgencies in Myanmar, Southern Thailand and the southern Philippines.
- 2 Robert O'Neill's 'Three Villages of Phuoc Tuy', *Quadrant*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1967) stands in stark contrast to Ron Boxall and Robert O'Neill (eds), *Vietnam Vanguard: The 5th Battalion's Approach to Counter-Insurgency* (Acton ACT: Australian National University Press, 1966). Despite Robert O'Neill's involvement with both articles, the broader *Vietnam Vanguard* project demonstrated that very few of the Australian Army officers involved in 5RAR's rotation understood counter-insurgency doctrine. In simple terms 'Three Villages' argued the benefit of a population-centric approach, whereas *Vietnam Vanguard* argued for an enemy-centric approach. Ultimately, Thomas Richardson's *Destroy and Build: Pacification in Phuoc Tuy, 1966–72* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017) concludes by stating that 'Pacification did not succeed in defeating the National Liberation Front within Phuoc Tuy', echoing an advisor's observation that it was 'as if we had never really been there'. Some might argue a similar conclusion with regard to Uruzghan province. Andrew Mumford similarly challenges the dogma of counter-insurgency expertise in the British Army: 'The British response to the complexities of 21st century insurgencies, particularly in their decentralised and globally networked form, has threatened to expose this competency [in counter-insurgency] as a colonial-era myth.' Andrew Mumford, *Puncturing the Counterinsurgency Myth: Britain and Irregular Warfare in the Past, Present and Future* (United States Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, September 2011), p. vii.
- 3 Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), available at: <https://defence.gov.au/StrategicUpdate-2020/>
- 4 Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, 'Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019–2020', *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 13, no. 5 (May 2020).
- 5 Ucko and Marks are more pointed in their criticism in this regard: 'What is both fascinating and of enormous concern is that this emerging insurgent approach is mirrored by the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine employed by Russia.' David Ucko and Thomas Marks, 'Violence in Context: Mapping the Strategies and Operational Art of Irregular Warfare', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2018), p. 222.
- 6 Sebastian Gorka and David Kilcullen, 'An Actor-Centric Theory of War: Understanding the Difference between COIN and Counter-Insurgency', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, vol. 60 (1st quarter, 2011).

- 7 Ucko and Marks (2018) advance a similar idea: 'Irregular warfare—best thought of as warfare unregulated by the laws and norms of war—has appeal also for state actors seeking to offset traditional military weakness or extend their influence' (p. 212).
- 8 Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in HH Gerth and C Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 78.
- 9 Joint Staff, *JP1: Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (2013).
- 10 Further examples are examined by Ucko and Marks: 'Western strategists were surprised by Hezbollah's use of conventional approaches within an irregular matrix in its war against Israel in 2006—despite ample familiarity with analogous efforts by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), never mind the Vietnamese doctrine and practice that led to communist victory in Southeast Asia and which both FMLN and FARC drew upon' (Ucko and Marks, 2018, p. 212).
- 11 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalisation Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 216.
- 12 Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies (ARIS), *Undergrounds in Insurgent, Revolutionary, and Resistance Warfare*, Robert Leonhard (ed.), (United States Army Special Operations Command and John Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 2013).
- 13 This terminology is a deliberate homage to the work done by Fathali M Moghaddam, 'The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration', *American Psychologist*, February–March 2005. Moghaddam's work centres upon a recognition that 'the current policy of focusing on individuals already at the top of the staircase brings only short-term gains. The best long-term policy against terrorism is prevention, which is made possible by nourishing contextualised democracy on the ground floor ... the metaphor of a narrowing staircase leading to the terrorist act at the top of a building ... Whether someone remains on a particular floor depends on the doors and spaces that person imagines to be open to her or him on that floor ... As individuals climb the staircase, they see fewer and fewer choices, until the only possible outcome is the destruction of others, or oneself, or both' (p. 161).
- 14 Alex P Schmid and Albert J Jongman, *Political Terrorism* (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008), p. 179.
- 15 Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, 'Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 6 (2014). Byman and Shapiro quote work by Thomas Hegghammer, who found that 'only one in nine [Saudi] fighters who went abroad between 1990 and 2010 came back interested in attacking at home'.
- 16 Vera Mironova, Ahmet Mhidi and Sam Whitt, 'The Jihadi Who Came in from the Cold', *Foreign Policy*, 10 August 2015.
- 17 James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976).
- 18 Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970).
- 19 David Serman and Nate Rosenblatt, *All Jihad Is Local, Volume II: ISIS in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula* (New America, April 2018), p. 4.
- 20 Alan Krueger and Maleckova Jitka, 'Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2003), p. 28. Furthermore, Krueger and Jitka 'find strong evidence that a lack of civil liberties is more directly correlated to participation in terrorism', thus reinforcing this focus upon relativity. 'An assessment of Jemahh Islamiyyah terrorists determined that more jihadis than not had either some college or advanced technical training. Even with this training, however, a majority still worked in unskilled jobs'—Darcy ME Noricks, 'The Root Causes of Terrorism', in Paul K Davis and Kim Cragin (eds), *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together* (Santa Monica CA: RAND, 2009), p. 31.

- 21 Rik Coolsaet, *Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave: What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to Islamic State? Insights from the Belgian Case*, Egmont Paper 81 (Brussels: Royal Institute for International Relations, March 2016), pp. 7–8. ‘Almost all were members of Sharia4Belgium, a neo-radical Islamist group created in early 2010 and particularly active in Antwerp’, thus also confirming subsequent analysis regarding the social networks that help organise discontent towards mobilisation.
- 22 Ibid., p. 9.
- 23 Ibid., p. 31.
- 24 Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, ‘Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters’, *Perspectives in Terrorism*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2014). ‘The group of Dutch foreign fighters consists mostly of individuals ... originating from lower or lower middle-class socio-economic backgrounds ... During the radicalisation and preparatory processes, our research subjects increasingly isolated themselves from society’ (pp. 107–108).
- 25 Nate Rosenblatt, *All Jihad Is Local, Volume I: What ISIS’ Files Tell Us about Its Fighters* (New America, July 2016), p. 7. These demographic statistics correlate with ‘the median ISIS fighter from the Arabian Peninsula ... 23 or 24 at the time he entered Syria’ (Sterman and Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 42). They are only marginally different from those captured in the Sinjar Records: ‘The average age of foreign fighters to Islamic State in Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007 was 24–25 years old and the median 22–23 years old. Most fighters in the Sinjar Records did not indicate their profession [approx. 3 in 4 did not] ... of those that did, 42.6 per cent were students’. These totals also suggests an overwhelming majority of the sample were unemployed—see Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records*, Harmony Project (West Point NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008), pp. 16–17.
- 26 ‘The search for status and risk taking can be unrelated to any sense of grievance or ideology’ (McCauley and Moskaleiko, 2011, p. 69).
- 27 Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 9. Furthermore, ‘the greatest substantive agreement is on the idea that committed individuals bring their friends and family members into terrorist groups using the strength of their relationships first—as opposed to the strength of their grievances or their faith’ (Noricks, 2009, p. 36).
- 28 These organisational models are ‘Vanguard’, ‘Parochial’, ‘Integrated’ and ‘Fragmented’ organisations, the details of which are not necessary for this essay.
- 29 Noor Huda Ismail, ‘The Role of Kinship in Indonesia’s Jemaah Islamiya’, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 11 (2006).
- 30 Edwin Bakker, ‘Kihadi Terrorists in Europe’, Security Paper No. 2 (Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, December 2006). Furthermore, ‘group dynamics such as peer pressure and intra-group affection seem to have been crucial in the process’ of radicalising al-Qaeda recruits from Saudi Arabia (Thomas Hegghammer, ‘Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalisation in Saudi Arabia’, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2006), p. 50).
- 31 Aisha Ahmad, *Jihad & Co.: Black Markets and Islamist Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). This finding is reinforced by Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror: How Drugs, Thugs, and Crime are Reshaping the Afghan War* (New York: Picador, 2020).

- 32 An example of this phenomenon in practice is noted by Della-Porta: 'Once having joined an underground group, the activists would be required to participate at increasingly demanding levels of activity, whether in terms of the risk or the time involved. They usually began their careers in the underground by distributing leaflets or renting an apartment for the group. The longer they remained underground, the more likely they were to end up participating in robberies and assassinations'. D Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 179.
- 33 Staniland, 2014, pp. 227–229. Staniland's formatting in this quotation is indicative of his conclusions that organisational structure matters, irrespective of the type of group being targeted.
- 34 David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*, (London, UK: Scribe Publications Pty Ltd, 2013); Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina*, (Harrisburg PA: Stackpole Co, 1961, Version 4, reprinted in 1994).
- 35 David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport CT: Praeger Security International, [1964] 2006).
- 36 Seth G Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), notes that 'a large body of quantitative evidence suggests that weak and ineffective governance is critical to the onset of insurgencies' (p. 27).
- 37 David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 38 Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want* (New York: Random House, 2006).
- 39 'The ISIS group's practice of killing civilians and captive soldiers seems arbitrary and barbaric when viewed from the outside ... By killing those who resist, ISIS intends to encourage others to submit.' Michael WS Ryan, *ISIS: The Terrorist Group That Would Be a State*, Centre on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups Case Studies (Newport RI: United States Naval War College, December 2015), p. 60. Such violence is evidently coercive control but, as we will see in due course, also contributes to a dynamic of a 'spiral of silence'.
- 40 For example, Eubank and Weinberg (1994, 1998, 2001), Harrelson-Stephens (2006) and Gurr (1970) are quoted in Noricks, 2009, pp. 23–30.
- 41 This dynamic of severe repression choking an insurgency was noted in Juozas Luksa, *Forest Brothers: The Account of an Anti-Soviet Lithuanian Freedom Fighter, 1944–1948* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009).
- 42 Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, 'The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion', *Journal of Communication*, Spring 1974, p. 43. The application of this theory to terrorist radicalisation was explored by Paul Lieber and Yael Lieber, *Reconceptualizing Radicalized Groups and Their Messages*, Occasional Paper (Tampa FL: JSOU Press, October 2017), who noted that the 'Spiral of Silence theory reasons that individuals who perceive themselves to be in the majority opinion group are more likely to speak up, and vice versa for those in the minority' (p. 6).
- 43 Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 51.
- 44 An examination of the influence of social media upon the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 is provided by Linda Herrera, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet* (Brooklyn NY: Verso, 2014).
- 45 Nate Rosenblatt and David Kilcullen, *How Raqqa Became the Capital of ISIS: A Proxy Warfare Case Study* (New America, July 2019).

- 46 Charlie Winter, *Totalitarian Insurgency: Evaluating the Islamic State's In-Theatre Propaganda Operations*, Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups Case Studies (Newport RI: United States Naval War College, 2017), p. 30.
- 47 Summer D Agan (ed.), *Narratives and Competing Messages: Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies* (United States Army Special Operations Command, 2018), p. 35. 'Political opportunity is a concept used to explain how the larger political environment alters the perception of chances of success or failure in resistance movements ... resource mobilisation, explains how groups leverage existing and acquired resources, whether financial, technical, or organisational, that enable resistance movements to emerge and sustain their operations.'
- 48 'What transforms deprivation into unbearable suffering, and prompts people to retaliate with protest or even violence is humiliation. Acts of humiliation convince people that punishing the humiliator is a just duty along the lines of *jus ad bellum*.' Mustafa Kirisci and Ibrahim Kocaman, 'Humiliation Is the Key to Understanding Widespread Rebellion', Political Violence at a Glance, 29 July 2020, at: <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2020/07/29/humiliation-is-the-key-to-understanding> (accessed 15 November 2020).
- 49 For example, the death of a family member was found to be linked with the decision to join the rebels in Speckhard and Akhmedova's study of Chechen fighters. See Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, 'The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War Chechen Society', *Democracy and Security*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2006).
- 50 These factors are particularly notable when grievances challenge sacred values, which in turn serves to 'generate hostility in the target audience ... and disengages the rational component of the brain' (Agan, 2018, pp. 28–31).
- 51 Ibid., p. 4.
- 52 Christopher Paul, 'How Do Terrorists Generate and Maintain Support?', in Paul K Davis and Kim Cragin (eds), *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together* (Santa Monica CA: RAND, 2009), p. 126.
- 53 McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011, p. 120.
- 54 Agan, 2018, p. 12.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Felter and Fishman, 2008, p. 7.
- 57 Ibid., p. 10. Darnah was also the highest per capital recruitment source for ISIS since 2012, at 21.5 per 100,000 Sunni residents (Rosenblatt, 2016, p. 13). 'Derna had a reputation for being too headstrong ... so the dictator humiliated it ... Beset by despair but nourished by a culture of resistance, its young men went to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Returning, they sought to topple the dictator himself, joining the LIFG insurgency in the mid-1990s ... Unemployment, drugs, and hopelessness soared ... At the turn of the millennium, hundreds of them flocked to fight with jihadist groups against American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan' (Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), pp. 115–116).
- 58 Felter and Fishman, 2008, p. 12.
- 59 Ibid., p. 19.
- 60 Ibid., p. 12. Interestingly, unlike Assad, Ghaddafi released Muslim Brotherhood inmates from incarceration in an effort to moderate the Islamist opposition (p. 13). A key grievance was the 28 June 1996 massacre of political prisoners at the Abu Salim prison, reportedly involving 1,200 men being executed, many of whom hailed from the eastern city of Benghazi (Wehrey, 2018, p. 27).

- 61 Sterman and Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 23.
- 62 Ibid., pp. 5–6.
- 63 Ibid., p. 22.
- 64 Ibid., p. 23.
- 65 Aaron Zelin, *The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya*, Policy Notes 45 (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018), p. 3. Zelin further notes that this total is just a shade below the mobilisation of foreign fighters to Iraq from 2003 to 2011 (4,000–5,000), thereby highlighting the escalating phenomenon of foreign fighter mobilisation over time.
- 66 Wehrey, 2018, p. 87.
- 67 Ibid., p. 108.
- 68 Ibid., p. 110.
- 69 Soufan Group, 'Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq' (The Soufan Group, December 2015).
- 70 Approximately one in four Tunisian foreign fighters to ISIS came from Tunis (Sterman and Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 65).
- 71 Natasha Quek and Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff, 'Analysis of the Tunisian Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 11, no. 5 (RSiS, Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, May 2019), p. 2.
- 72 Sterman and Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 32.
- 73 Quek and Alkaff, 2019.
- 74 Zelin, 2018, p.2; Quek and Alkaff, 2019.
- 75 This theme of the provision of means as a key component of rebellion against authority is explored by Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow's Terrorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 76 I explore Hizbollah as an irregular warfare case study in a presentation recorded for the Australian Army Research Centre, available at: <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/library/seminar-series/hizbollah-case-study> (accessed 15 November 2020).

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## **Irregular Warfare Observations from Southern Thailand: How Not To Do COIN**

**Christopher Webb**

The ongoing Malay-Muslim secessionist insurgency in Southern Thailand represents a cogent challenge to the legitimacy of the Thai state in the southern provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani, and adjoining districts of neighbouring Songkhla. Since re-igniting in the early 2000s, this conflict is far from abating. As the insurgency reaches its 17th year, Thai authorities are no closer to a solution than they were in the early stages of the conflict, with violence continuing at a slow boil.<sup>1</sup> Responsible for nearly 7,000 deaths<sup>2</sup>, the Southern Thai conflict is one of the most serious, and most deadly, contemporary insurgencies in South-East Asia,<sup>3</sup> providing some important reinforcement to observations of eminent irregular warfare theorists, and salient lessons for modern security forces and policymakers in what not to do.

As articulated in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, Australia's strategic environment will continue to be shaped by great power competition between the United States and China, particularly regarding influence throughout Asia. As a small to middle Indo-Pacific power, Australia has great strategic interest in the stability of ASEAN, and its individual member states, as a collective security community reinforcing a rules-based global order. While ASEAN has a strict non-interference policy in the internal matters of its individual members, the proximity of Thailand's southern insurgency to Malaysia's borders, and the government's perpetual inability to provide stability in the southern provinces is cause for concern. Despite nearly two decades of dedicated counter-insurgency (COIN) efforts by the Thai state, any cessation of violence remains a distant possibility.

Using the Southern Thailand insurgency as a case study, this essay aims to review the historical, social and economic aspects of the Southern Thai provinces which have likely contributed to the commencement and sustainment of political violence; and explore the military and political responses to the violence to date, attempting to identify why they have been ineffective. Specifically, the Thai government's failure to recognise the relative deprivation of the Malay identity group as a causal factor for the violence has led to inappropriate focus on an enemy-centric approach, rather than addressing population-centric issues. Such an inappropriate strategy provided a spark to the tinderbox of Malay discontent, resulting in waves of violence that have spanned decades. Significantly, acute spikes in violence were observed to coincide with the 2019 Thai general elections and ASEAN security summit held in Bangkok that same year.<sup>4</sup> The temporal link to high-profile political events is no coincidence, a stark reminder that the southern violence is political in nature and that policy-based solutions will be far more effective than military ones.

Thus, the Southern Thai insurgency provides a useful case study to reinforce Maher's observations provided earlier in this collection. Relative Deprivation, Competitive Control, and identity group narratives are strong contributors to this long-lasting period of political violence. However, when examining the political precursors to this violence however, it is important to note that contributing conditions have been in place for centuries, with violence breaking out several times. The focus of this essay will be on the most recent, and most significant, phase of violence in the Malay-Muslim secessionist struggle, but cannot neglect consideration of the long history of socio-political conditions which have fed the fire.

## **Historical Precursors**

Patani Malays have suffered marginalisation by the broader Buddhist Thai state<sup>5</sup> since the Siamese conquest of the Sultanate of Patani in the 18th century. The Malay Sultanate of Patani had been a proud centre of Islam in South-East Asia<sup>6</sup> since its court converted from Buddhism in 1457.<sup>7</sup> As part of the Thai Chakri Dynasty's 18th century expansion over the Malay Peninsula, the Sultanate of Patani was conquered in 1789,<sup>8</sup> and a loose tributary system<sup>9</sup> was imposed over Patani territory. Thai assimilation attempts commenced almost immediately, but it was not until 1816 that

real attempts to decrease local autonomy began.<sup>10</sup> Large-scale revolts were recorded in 1832 when the region was divided into seven provinces to facilitate tax collection, and again in 1902, which led to the arrest of the Raja of Patani.<sup>11</sup> Thai and British competition in the 19th century for control over the Malay Peninsula ultimately resulted in the 1909 Anglo-Thai treaty, which saw the formal delineation of a border between Malaysia and modern-day Thailand, with no recognition of the former proud Islamic state of Patani. Adding insult to injury, the ratified international border split the former sultanate apart, with the three northern provinces being formally absorbed into the modern Thai state.<sup>12</sup> The lack of consideration of Patani Malay interests in the Anglo-Thai treaty may have elicited serious questions about the legitimacy of the agreement in the eyes of the governed.

The pace of assimilation increased into the 1930s<sup>13</sup> in line with a growing tide of Thai nationalism. Islamic laws were abolished, and all Thai citizens, regardless of ethnicity, were forced to adopt common Thai customs.<sup>14</sup> In following years, a number of Muslim opposition movements emerged, calling for self-rule, language and cultural rights, and a return of sharia law, and revolts became commonplace.<sup>15</sup>

Between 1960 and 1998, a variety of militant separatist movements operated against the Thai authorities in the southern provinces, which existed as 'zones of dissonance' to Bangkok's rule.<sup>16</sup> While these groups grew capable enough to represent a threat to the security of the South, their left-wing, socialist platforms did not appeal to the largely conservative population, and they never managed to attain sufficient mass to truly challenge Thai authorities in Bangkok.<sup>17</sup> The groups were also plagued by factional infighting and disagreement regarding pursuit of both violent and non-violent strategies.<sup>18</sup> Despite the public cadres of the movements enjoying safe haven in Northern Malaysia from which to plan and launch attacks, improved border security cooperation between Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok agreed in 1998,<sup>19</sup> approving joint cross-border police raids,<sup>20</sup> facilitated the apprehension of a large number of insurgent leaders. The decapitation strategy proved decisive;<sup>21</sup> movements suffered mass membership exodus, with many fighters taking advantage of a government amnesty program.

Following the success of Thailand's enemy-centric COIN operations, and the near complete collapse of the 1990s opposition movements, a half-hearted attempt by the Thai government to address some of the social issues in the South resulted in a significant ebb in violence, and a relatively peaceful intervening period lasted into the early 2000s. During this period, the Thai government made statements and promises which suggested awareness of the underlying socio-political causes of the unrest, but failed to follow through with meaningful mitigation measures. A key factor in undermining this peace was the decision in 2001 by the newly elected Thaksin government to dismantle the Southern Border Provincial Administrative Committee, the only effectual interagency organisation for administration and security in the South, and to transfer internal security responsibilities to the police. This one policy decision severely eroded the local population's trust, (as the police were far more heavy-handed), hampered operational effectiveness and removed an organisation with a proven record of dispute resolution, once again leaving a void for militant opposition.<sup>22</sup> While Thai colonialism and forced assimilation had resulted in rebellion numerous times<sup>23</sup> in the preceding centuries, never before had violence reached levels which would be seen through the early 2000s.<sup>24</sup>

## **The Spark which Set Fire to the Prairie<sup>25</sup>**

The violence which re-emerged in 2001 provoked a heavy security response from the Thai government, which sought to resurrect the successes of the enemy-centric focus<sup>26</sup> of previous campaigns. The occupation of the South by Thai security forces,<sup>27</sup> and their heavy-handed tactics, were rather a direct catalyst for the acceleration of violence in 2004.

The first of two catalytic events<sup>28</sup> took place on 28 April 2004 when militants, in a coordinated series of attacks, attempted to overrun a string of police and military positions across Pattani, Yala and Songkhla.<sup>29</sup> Following an aggressive government response, 31 heavily armed gunmen sought refuge in the 16th century mosque at Krue Se,<sup>30</sup> a symbol of South-East Asian Islamic faith, and one of the most revered Islamic religious sites in South-East Asia.<sup>31</sup> To end a lengthy siege, the Royal Thai Army (RTA) stormed the mosque, killing all militants therein. At the end of the day, 108 militants lay dead across the provinces, drawing the ire of the local population, who viewed the militants as martyrs and the state as butchers. Even though an independent investigation into the Krue Se incident found

the RTA negligent in 'failing to launch genuine negotiations for surrender',<sup>32</sup> no action was taken to hold those involved accountable. Over the following months, violence escalated significantly, with militants targeting teachers, local government officials and other 'agents of the state'.<sup>33</sup> Attempting to regain control of the southern provinces, the Thai administration declared martial law and dispatched thousands of additional troops.

The second, and 'most important',<sup>34</sup> catalytic event occurred on 25 October 2004 when roughly 2,000 Malay-Muslim (mostly) unarmed youth gathered in demonstration against martial law and the perceived 'occupation' of the South by the Thai military, in the border village of Tak Bai. Thai soldiers and security officials severely mishandled the event, using live ammunition to disperse the crowd, resulting in several deaths.<sup>35</sup> About 1,300 young men were detained for questioning and taken away in military trucks, bound and stacked like sardines.<sup>36</sup> Seventy-eight young men perished of asphyxiation while thus held in custody. The death of 85 protestors became known as the 'Tak Bai Massacre', drawing international attention and sparking riots across the region.<sup>37</sup> With this groundswell of popular support, violence soared; nearly 30 people were killed in revenge attacks within just two weeks of the incident. Attacks became more frequent, spectacular, coordinated and sophisticated,<sup>38</sup> resulting in the May 2005<sup>39</sup> imposition of an emergency decree replacing martial law with enhanced powers of arrest and control<sup>40</sup> for government forces, with near-total immunity<sup>41</sup> from prosecution.

As violence escalated towards a mid-2007<sup>42</sup> peak, the powers granted by the emergency decree were a key motivator for continued resistance. Under the controversial law, indiscriminate arrests and detentions were common. Detainees were able to be held without charge for 28 days; regardless, many were held for 12 to 18 months. Allegations of torture and coerced confessions were persistent, but immunity under the decree has resulted in not a single officer being convicted of human rights abuses.<sup>43</sup>

Since 2007, the insurgency has continued in waves of violence, with spikes observed to coincide with national elections and other events of political significance, occasionally simmering down through periods of ineffectual negotiation.<sup>44</sup> Today the insurgency continues but is now categorised more by discriminant violence and retaliatory attacks<sup>45</sup> than large-scale unrest. Violence in the southern provinces is now accepted by the Malay population as 'normal',<sup>46</sup> with one person killed a day considered 'tolerable'.<sup>47</sup>

The current insurgent movement has learned from the mistakes of its predecessors. Highly secretive, the organisation is almost entirely underground. What is traditionally defined as the 'public component',<sup>48</sup> or political voice, of the movement is all but absent. There is no political figurehead delivering demands.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, there is rarely (if ever) any genuine claim of responsibility from the organisation following attacks.<sup>50</sup> While the Thai counter-insurgency efforts of the 1990s were highly successful off the back of network decapitation, the current generation's heightened level of operational security discipline allows them to remain below the detection threshold of the Thai security forces, whose interagency rivalries prevent efficient intelligence sharing.<sup>51</sup>

It is unfair, however, to refer to the insurgent movement in the singular, as there are multiple organisations<sup>52</sup> working towards the same goal. Groups are decentralised, independent<sup>53</sup> and almost fractious, but still exercise an 'unprecedented level of coordination'<sup>54</sup> to achieve maximum effect across wide geographic areas. Comprehensive control of the disparate elements by an umbrella political apparatus is far less likely.<sup>55</sup> While the previous generations of insurgent movements had difficulty engaging popular support, the current movement has been far more successful, establishing shadow social structures and forcing people out of state institutions.<sup>56</sup> In 2007, the National Reconciliation Commission estimated that about 30 per cent of the population were sympathetic and that a full 2 per cent of the population, approximately 60,000 people, could be considered active insurgents.<sup>57</sup>

## **Repression of the Malay Ethnic Identity Group**

In 2013, the United States Army Special Operations Command's Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies (ARIS) Project conducted a study into the underlying causes of political violence.<sup>58</sup> It identified eight risk factors,<sup>59</sup> not prioritised and not equally weighted. Language used in the study suggests the most critical risk factors to be human factors, specifically relating to governance and to marginalisation of identity groups. The latter is described as 'the strongest and most immediate risk factor for radicalisation', particularly when the identity group is based on ethnicity.<sup>60</sup> This assertion is particularly relevant to the Southern Thai conflict.

The southern Thailand insurgent movement is based around the alienation, discrimination and marginalisation<sup>61</sup> of the Malay-Muslim ethnic identity in the provinces of southern Thailand. As discussed above, Thai occupation and assimilation of Patani is centuries old. Regardless, the erosion of the Malay-Muslim identity is still keenly felt. The local Malays in the southern provinces believe that their unique Patani identity and traditional way of living is under threat from an illegitimate Bangkok government.<sup>62</sup> The draconian assimilation measures of the 1930s, which outlawed the use of the Malay language and the wearing of Malay dress,<sup>63</sup> do not remain in effect, but contemporary social restrictions still drive feelings of alienation. The authority of sharia courts was officially revoked with the imposition of the Anglo-Thai treaty,<sup>64</sup> and although there have been a number of attempts to bring Islamic law back into the Thai legal system since, sharia has remained subordinate to the national apparatus. The imposition of a national education curriculum has a multifaceted negative impact on Muslim society in the South. Not only is the curriculum secular but also it is only taught in the Thai language, which many in the Muslim community do not speak. The Ministry of Education refuses to recognise qualifications from any educational facilities which do not deliver the national curriculum, making job-seeking difficult for graduates of Islamic institutions and leading to higher rates of Malay unemployment.<sup>65</sup> These issues have led to a deep-seated feeling of second-class status.

Until the most recent Thai constitution was issued in 2017, the existence of ethnic minorities was not constitutionally recognised.<sup>66</sup> While the 2017 constitution promotes 'the right for different ethnic groups to live in the society according to traditional culture, custom and ways of life', this comes with the caveat of 'insofar as it is not contrary to public order, or good morals'.<sup>67</sup> The Thai constitution still promotes a nationalist social identity, supported by the trinity of nation, religion and King. When the community of the Deep South identify as ethnic Patani-Malay, vice Thai, follow a different religion and cling to the ideal of an earlier Patani kingdom, the Thai nationalist agenda is particularly unsuccessful.<sup>68</sup> Rather than being seen as paternalistic, its assimilationist policies are framed as suppression of the Malay-Muslim identity by an illegitimate colonial power, and are a driving force of the insurgent movement.<sup>69</sup>

## Relative Deprivation

Potentially exacerbating the feelings of marginalisation which stem from Thailand's social policies is the relative economic deprivation present in the southern provinces. Muslim majority areas are less developed, and among the poorest provinces in Thailand.<sup>70</sup> Per capita income across the southern Muslim communities is less than half the national average<sup>71</sup> and Yala has the third-lowest employment rate in the country.<sup>72</sup> Explaining *Why Men Rebel*, Gurr's theory of relative deprivation<sup>73</sup> cautions about a 'mismatch between peoples' level of expectation and their economic reality'.<sup>74</sup> However, Gurr's theory refers to 'discrepancies between value expectations and value capabilities', where 'values' constitute 'welfare values, power values, and interpersonal values'.<sup>75</sup> While economic deprivation may impact on 'welfare values', there is less association with 'power values' or 'interpersonal values'. Power values are more aligned to an individual's, or collective's, ability to influence their environment, either politically or in terms of security. Interpersonal values include the ability to associate or participate in social or familial identity groups. Therefore, Gurr's relative deprivation contains wider considerations than just economic deficit, which is certainly present but not a key driver in the Southern Thai conflict.<sup>76</sup> Gurr's relative deprivation theory could appropriately be applied to the deprivation of Malay-Muslim ethnic identity, social justice, religious education, and security in the southern Thai provinces leading up to 2004. Just as Maher's "Triangle of Rebellion" in the opening chapter of this collection identified Relative Deprivation as "the heat that sustains" armed rebellion, its presence in the Southern Thai provinces is likely to be a pillar of the movement.

## Competitive Control

The Thai security response to the ongoing crisis has been mired in controversy. Despite tens of thousands of troops being deployed to the southern provinces, violence has continued for decades, and no significant blows have been landed against the insurgents. The Thai military's heavy-handed tactics were a direct catalyst for the acceleration of violence following the siege at Krue Se Mosque and the hugely negligent response to protests at Tak Bai. The 'Tak Bai Massacre' in particular was the 'single spark that set fire to the prairie'<sup>77</sup> and a certain contributor to the number of 'accidental guerrillas' fighting alongside the insurgents.<sup>78</sup> The Thaksin administration's immediate response to the escalation of

violence in 2004, ‘surging’ up to 60,000 soldiers, rangers and police to the southern provinces, was widely viewed as an occupation by a colonial power.<sup>79</sup> Well-documented allegations of abusive behaviour, torture and extra-judicial killings by elements of the security forces, conducted with seeming impunity, destroyed any remaining perceptions of legitimacy, further alienating the population and fuelling ongoing tensions.<sup>80</sup> In his research for the RAND Corporation, Peter Chalk quotes a commentator stating that ‘it was not so much that indigenous Malays actively supported the insurgents or shared their aspiration for an independent state; it was just that they feared and resented the police and military more’.<sup>81</sup>

The key concern in the Thai military’s response to the re-emergence of violence was its inability (or unwillingness) to accept the evolving nature of the insurgency.<sup>82</sup> The Thai government’s resurrection of an enemy-centric decapitation strategy, which was effective against opposition movements of the 1990s,<sup>83</sup> failed to recognise the evolution of the contemporary insurgency, which is highly secretive, is decentralised and, in stark contrast to its predecessors, enjoys popular support. The insurgents’ short to medium term goals are simple: render the southern provinces ungovernable for the colonial Thai occupiers; goad Thai security forces into heavy-handed and repressive responses; and impose/restore Patani-Malay values on the local community.<sup>84</sup> In achieving these goals they have been largely successful to date, providing an excellent example of David Kilcullen’s theory of ‘competitive control’.<sup>85</sup>

Kilcullen highlights that ‘in irregular conflicts, the local armed actor that a given population perceives as best able to establish a predictable, consistent, wide-spectrum normative system of control is the most likely to dominate that population’. In simple terms this means that ‘populations will respond to a predictable, ordered, normative system that tells them exactly what they need to do, and not do, in order to be safe’. To a population surrounded by conflict, this feeling of safety reigns supreme and can lead a population to support an armed group they otherwise would not, because of the order it creates.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Maher’s ‘Triangle of Rebellion’ describes control over the population as “the oxygen that sustains the flame of rebellion.”

While the militants have not had the physical numbers to control large areas of territory, they have proven far more capable at controlling the ‘mental space’ and the popular narrative than the Thai authorities. They have a clear political agenda, and their effective social programs being implemented

across the South have forced people out of state-run legal, medical and educational apparatus, and have brutally suppressed any moderate Muslims who endorse conciliation.<sup>87</sup> Conversely, the government security intelligence apparatus, marred by interagency tensions, jurisdictional conflicts and linguistic challenges,<sup>88</sup> has proved incapable<sup>89</sup> of illuminating the highly secretive underground factions supporting the violence. Despite 'control' of the physical space, Thai security forces have remained largely on the defensive, reactive and vulnerable to attack.<sup>90</sup> While the militants retain almost unrestricted freedom of manoeuvre among the population, they are able to dictate terms. To the local population, this inability to prevent attacks against Buddhists, security forces and other state figures in the South undermines any chance of success for Thai government forces in competitive control.

## Counter-Insurgency vs Counter-Terrorism

Additionally, the failure to accompany the military, threat-centric line of effort with a population-centric line which addresses the underlying grievances of the population has ceded popular support to the enemy. Kilcullen's seminal work *Accidental Guerrilla*<sup>91</sup> notes that a counter-terrorism strategy focuses on the individual terrorist and the terrorist network. The counter-terrorism strategy assumes removing the network would remove the problem. According to Kilcullen, however, insurgency is a mass social phenomenon, where the enemy manipulates a wave of social grievances to support the movement. In this case, removing the network does not treat the cause and therefore will not remove the problem. Kilcullen suggest that true COIN is population-centric, involving competition with the insurgent for influence and control of the population at the grassroots level.<sup>92</sup> This would suggest that the Thai approach to the conflict in the South is more appropriately defined as counter-terrorism rather than counter-insurgency, potentially indicating a lack of acceptance of the political nature of the violence. The failure to adapt their strategy despite decades of experience further suggests that resolution of the situation is a low priority for the Thai military.<sup>93</sup>

Examination of Thai military spending is also indicative of the low strategic priority allocated to the southern insurgency by Thai defence leadership. Between December 2006 and January 2009, the Thai military announced over \$2.5 billion in arms purchases and \$9.3 billion in modernisation expenditure, the vast majority of which would have little to no value in combating an insurgency.<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, the Thaksin administration's inept, inconsistent policies exacerbated the insurgency.<sup>95</sup> The preferred policy of the Thaksin government was to 'confront the insurgents with directed force'<sup>96</sup> rather than accept the political nature of the movement and consider negotiation or appeasement of social dissatisfaction. In further defiance of the movement's political roots, at the outbreak of violence the Thai government's policy line was to credit attacks to 'local bandits' or 'drug addicts'<sup>97</sup> in an attempt to frame the violence as a criminal, vice ideological, issue. The implementation of the Emergency Decree in 2005 has also had enduring ill-effects, providing security forces with near-total immunity and thereby suggesting tacit approval of abuses committed by the military or police. As late as 2019, Human Rights Watch commented that the Thai government 'regularly uses military detention under the 2005 Emergency Decree in which abuses occur during interrogation with impunity'.<sup>98</sup> While the decree allows the detention of suspects without charge for 28 days, only 19 per cent of the 7,680 people arrested under the decree by February 2011 ended up being charged by police. Of those charged, 43 per cent of the suspects who went to trial were eventually acquitted for a lack of evidence.<sup>99</sup> In October 2019, a Buddhist Chief Judge of the Yala Trial Court shot himself in public protest against coercion by senior members of the Thai judicial system to deliver capital punishment to Muslim respondents even when lacking the appropriate evidence for a conviction, let alone the death penalty.<sup>100</sup> Indiscriminate detention, combined with the blatant lack of consequence for human rights abuses perpetrated by security forces, and the clear prejudice present in the judicial process, has had serious consequences for perceptions among the local population and have strengthened the insurgency.<sup>101</sup> Social injustice has thus become a key grievance in the movement's ideology.<sup>102</sup>

## **Political Instability and Appetite**

Dissatisfaction with Thaksin's handling of the insurgency was in fact a key trigger for the military coup of 2006.<sup>103</sup> Despite this, at the time of writing, the Emergency Decree remains in effect, and little has been done to reverse the damage of the Thaksin administration's draconian policies, despite multiple changes of government.<sup>104</sup>

While criticising the Thai government for inconsistent and ill-conceived policies on the southern conflict, it is important to note the country's volatile political architecture over the same period of time. Between 2001

and 2020, the Thai government changed hands no fewer than eight times, twice as a result of military coups. Partisan loyalties surrounding the circumstances of Thaksin's fall from grace caused significant political turmoil, including violence in Bangkok between 2008 and 2009 and again in 2013 and 2014.<sup>105</sup> The plight of the democratic process, censorship and the imposition of new laws outlawing public gatherings of more than five people has further resulted in significant civil unrest in the capital.<sup>106</sup> In this tumultuous political environment, a home-grown, localised insurgency that does not significantly threaten the tourism industry or the national economy is somewhat tolerable.<sup>107</sup> The violence is generally contained within the southern provinces and has not (yet) drawn such a mass as to represent a cogent challenge to Bangkok. There are far more serious challenges to the government's legitimate rule from other sources far closer to the capital, which draw attention away from the crisis in the South.

Significantly, for six of the recent insurgency's 17 years, the state of Thailand was governed by a conservative military junta. The military-led government was far more defensive of the constitution's 'indivisible state' and therefore far less willing to accommodate negotiations which included discussion of autonomy or secession. Following the 2019 general elections, previous military chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha remained in power as Prime Minister, reducing the likelihood of a change in this policy position. Of note, pro-democracy protests against Chan-ocha's military-backed government<sup>108</sup> have continued well into 2020,<sup>109</sup> further highlighting that the insurgency is not likely to emerge as the primary challenger to the legitimacy of the Thai government any time soon. In such a political climate, the threat posed by the southern opposition movement is apparently of peripheral concern.

## **Key Lessons and Conclusion**

The lack of progress towards a resolution after such a protracted period of conflict amounts to a failure by the Thai government and its security forces to adequately address the instability in the southern Provinces, providing valuable lessons in what not to do to observers of irregular warfare theory.

Firstly, the failure of successive Thai administrations to recognise and accept the political nature of the violence, whether from ignorance or denial, resulted in both an inability to address the root cause of unrest and the application of an inappropriate military strategy to counter the

opposition movement. When referring to the southern militants, terms such as ‘terrorists’, ‘criminals’ and ‘jihadists’ continue to creep into the official Thai discourse. More than simply semantics, the strategic impact of such nomenclature is policy misdirection in the continuing pursuit of a counter-terrorism strategy. As outlined above, Kilcullen’s *The Accidental Guerrilla*<sup>110</sup> articulates that a counter-terrorism strategy focuses on defeating the threat network (enemy-centric), whereas a counter-insurgency strategy focuses on defeating the network’s ability to leverage popular disaffection (population-centric).<sup>111</sup> By labelling the movement as terrorist or criminal, the Thai authorities have ignored or overlooked their responsibilities to address the root causes of disaffection among the Malay population in the southern provinces. When the most serious risk factors for political violence, as identified in the ARIS study,<sup>112</sup> form the basis of the underlying grievances which support the opposition movement, and the ethnic tensions are deeply ingrained by centuries of assimilationist policies, dedicated effort and careful policy treatments are going to be required. In his comprehensive study of the insurgency, *Conspiracy of Silence*,<sup>113</sup> Zachary Abuza lists the policy reforms that could make a real difference as issues of security force immunity, legal reforms and the protection of defendant rights, and serious discussions about political autonomy,<sup>114</sup> but notes inappropriate political influence of the military and interagency ‘turf wars’ as having significant negative effects on the development of appropriate policy solutions.<sup>115</sup>

Secondly, the Thai security apparatus demonstrates a crippling lack of flexibility in resurrecting an outdated enemy-centric, counter-leadership strategy and failing to adapt to the evolution of the threat group, despite decades of conflict experience. Reflecting on their severe losses in the 1990s, opposition groups maintain primacy of operational security, with the vast majority of the organisation existing below the Thai security detection threshold. The inability to overcome interagency rivalries to facilitate effective intelligence sharing, and therefore understanding of threat networks, denies Thai security forces the ability to detect, locate and curtail the activities of the underground elements which support the insurgency. Thus, the Thai military posture has been largely static, defensive and reactive to the initiative and freedom of action enjoyed by the threat actors.<sup>116</sup>

This systemic inflexibility has also resulted in the inexcusable failure to both recognise and rectify some major missteps in the campaign thus far. The catalytic events at Krue Se and Tak Bai were made so by the excessive aggression of Thai military personnel. While these events have been

independently investigated<sup>117</sup> and official apologies have been delivered, no individuals have been held accountable and therefore no justice has been provided to those affected.<sup>118</sup> Widespread concern about and condemnation of the 2005 Emergency Decree has fallen on deaf ears, providing the military seemingly enduring approval to directly exacerbate perceptions of social injustice through continuing impunity to human rights abuses.<sup>119</sup> Abuza noted, from interviews with multiple Muslims in the South, that 'until the issue of social justice is tackled, the insurgency cannot be quelled.'<sup>120</sup> The Southern Provinces remain saturated by Thai military presence, leaving no opportunity for the public perceptions of a colonial occupation to abate. Some commentators have even started to refer to Southern Thailand as 'a military colony'.<sup>121</sup> The Thai military's tunnel vision on treating the symptoms of the insurgency, rather than the underlying causes of popular discontent, has provided the opposition movement the edge in competitive control.

Finally, the violence in the southern provinces continues as a result of the successive Thai governments and military leadership not being committed to defeating a low-level insurgency which is not seen as a credible threat to Bangkok and at times provides justification for increased defence budgets.<sup>122</sup> Political stability has been anathema to Bangkok over the last few decades, with military coups, violent protests and multiple impeachments presenting far more prominent dilemmas to sitting administrations. While the insurgency remains contained to the South, it is unlikely to take primacy of attention over existential threats in the streets of the capital.<sup>123</sup> Although negotiations have occurred on a couple of occasions,<sup>124</sup> neither party has demonstrated genuine investment in the process or commitment to a peaceful outcome. The movement's secessionist objectives, or demands for autonomy, meet strong constitutional resistance from conservative interlocutors in the military hierarchy, as well as senior members of the Thai cabinet. The human risk factors<sup>125</sup> which drive popular dissatisfaction have been laid down over centuries of assimilationist policies; genuine, deliberate political investment will be required to reverse these effects, regardless of military strategy. Despite multiple successive Thai leaders pledging to fix the 'southern problem', the will to commit such an investment is clearly lacking.

In light of these three clear failings, which have endured over 17 years of continuous violence and conflict, it is clear that a peaceful solution is not on the near horizon. Srisimpob Jitpiromsri and Duncan McCargo noted in 2020 that 'since the inept interventions of the Thai state are prime components of the ongoing conflict, bringing peace to the South must involve ways for Bangkok to do less, not more'.<sup>126</sup> This would require both a political and a strategic adaptability that the Thai government has been neither able nor willing to demonstrate in the conflict's history.

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## Endnotes

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- 2 International Crisis Group, "Jihadism in Southern Thailand: A Phantom Menace," Asia Report (Brussels, 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/thailand/291-jihadism-southern-thailand-phantom-menace> in particular, its longstanding Malay-Muslim insurgency to jihadist influence. To date, there is no evidence of jihadists making inroads among the separatist fronts fighting for what they see as liberation of their homeland, Patani. But the conflict and a series of ISIS scares in Thailand are fanning fears of a new terrorist threat. Such fears are not irrational, though are largely misplaced and should not obscure the calamity of the insurgency and the need to end it. Direct talks between insurgent leaders and the government are a priority; a decentralised political system could help address the principal grievances in the south while preserving the unitary Thai state. Al-Qaeda and ISIS have exploited protracted conflicts across the Muslim world to further their agendas, including in areas that are under the sovereignty of capable states but where central government authority is weak. During the ISIS era, transnational jihadism in South East Asia mostly has been a "bottom-up" phenomenon with pre-existing militant groups (for instance in Indonesia and the Philippines , p. ii.
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- 18 Chalk, "The Malay-Muslim Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Understanding the Conflict's Dynamic.", pp. 5–6.
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# **“You Can’t Start a Fire Without a Spark”: Explaining Political Precursors to Violence in African Civil Conflicts**

**Brooke Barling**

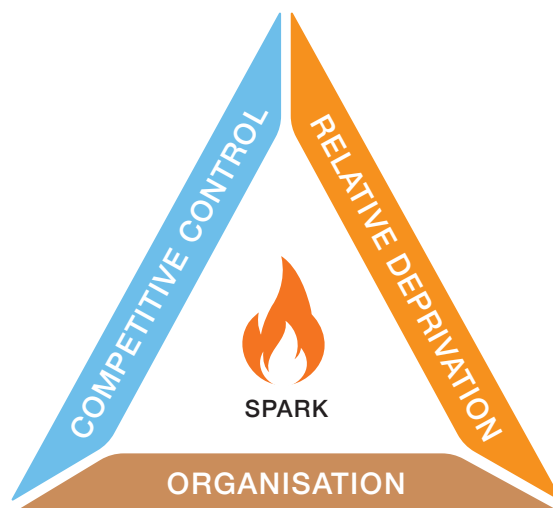
## **Introduction**

The Mozambique war of independence from Portugal has been regarded as one of Africa’s greatest stories of liberation to date. Scholars from around the globe have written about the conflict and subsequent civil war, exploring the complex factors within the narrative by applying theories of irregular warfare to better understand its drivers, events, and outcomes. Typically, researchers seek to fit a theory to a case study, molding its events in a way which is in line with the parameters of the theory. This paper will seek to do the reverse. By applying the case studies of the Mozambique Civil War and Rhodesian Insurgency to the ‘Triangle of Rebellion’, an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the theory will be conducted. By looking at the interconnectedness of the model, the way in which it explains individual elements of conflict, the weighting it place on each of these elements, and the factors which spark violence, this paper will go on to explain that, much like the enduring nature yet changing character of war, the model’s utility is in the generic rather than specific application.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the analysis will identify what conditions still exist within the region which could spark future conflict, what Australia might learn from this in relation to conflicting external interests in the region, and the potential policy changes which could be made to lessen the global impact.

## The Model

Developed by Andrew Maher, the Triangle of Rebellion is a framework through which to view conflicts commonly deemed to be irregular in nature. The theory groups factors into three categories of equal weight to explain elements pertinent to the causation of a rebellion, including its organisation, the perceived deprivations of the population, and elements of competitive control enforced by oppressive regimes.<sup>2</sup>

The element of organisation explains the factors that sustain, direct, and expand the rebellion, as well as the establishment of four components key to a conflict. The first component is the 'underground'; a clandestine sub-organisation that operates throughout areas unoccupied by the second, 'armed component' of the rebellion. This visible military or paramilitary arm conducts overt operations in the name of the movement. The third 'auxiliary' component provides clandestine support to the irregular organisation through activities such as intelligence gathering, without displaying clear alignment or overt support to the rebellion. Finally, the fourth component, the 'public component,' encompasses the political campaign and overt communication of the group's governmental or administrative narrative.<sup>3</sup>



*Figure 1 – The Triangle of Rebellion*

The second element is relative deprivation. It includes factors that sustain a rebellion, or the perceived grievances for which the populace in question identify in response to the administration in power. These grievances are systemic and enduring, capturing the attention of the majority of the population whose concerns remain unaddressed by the governing body.

The third element is that of competitive control, which captures the attention of the world, creating sympathy, drawing international support, and desensitising the population to armed conflict. This aspect looks at the existing government against which the rebellion is directed. If the governing power attempts to preemptively suppress the rebellion by unjust population controls, they run the risk of incurring the condemnation of the global community for a reaction perceived to be out of proportion to the threat. Suppressing the developing movement too late runs the risk of the rebelling force growing too powerful as a result of international sustenance, with support from assisting states arriving too late for the governing party to effectively quell the rebellion.

Finally, the theory states there needs to be a spark that brings the conflict to life—a pivoting factor that transitions the conflict from non-violent to violent. Rather than the simple culmination of pressures resulting from the three elements, the theory views the spark as a single act or event that triggers open armed conflict. While it may result from competitive control and relative deprivation, the spark is separate from these aspects; however, it relies on the strong organisation of the rebelling force to shift the conflict from non-violent to violent.<sup>4</sup>

## **Case Studies**

### **Mozambique Civil War**

Victorious over the Portuguese at the end of the war of independence, the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) constructed a political narrative proclaiming their new government as a 'people's democracy'. This so-called scientific socialist movement was for the people, forming a coalition between workers and those on the lowest step of the socio-economic ladder. Under Machel's lead, and supported by the People's Forces of the Liberation of Mozambique, the FRELIMO government stood against the exploitation of its people to foster a productive power within the nation by supporting creativity and initiative.<sup>5</sup>

Opposed to the repression and racism brought on society by the Portuguese colonial regime, FRELIMO promoted inclusion and social freedom regardless of ethnicity or race.<sup>6</sup> The party's objective was to follow the Soviet example, with regional development being driven by state sponsored agriculture and industry on a national scale. Despite this glossy narrative, spouting strong ideas for a prosperous independent nation, dissatisfaction grew among marginalised members of the population and traditional community leaders, resulting in localised conflicts and increased support for an alternative regime.<sup>7</sup>

Established in 1975 by Andrre Matsangaissa, a former senior official within the FRELIMO's armed auxiliary, the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) became the opposing political force within Mozambique.<sup>8</sup> With the support of the Rhodesian Intelligence Service, RENAMO offered an alternative to the Marxist movement, aiming to re-optimize government institutions and norms, enhance control over the civilian population, gain territory, improve infrastructure and access to services, and ultimately govern. The party grew as an indigenous reform-orientated social structure that engaged in unconventional guerrilla activities aiming to disrupt FREMILO through the social movement and international support.<sup>9</sup> The rebellion moved quickly to establish itself, formulating clear and categorical elements including underground, an armed component, auxiliary groups, and a public component.

The establishment of a controlled underground element was pertinent to the group's ability to enact its political narrative. By forming different zones, RENAMO established networks that supported fighters, financing, and sustenance for the displaced population and guerrillas.<sup>10</sup> Civilians were forcefully moved to 'control zones' after being abducted from government-controlled areas.<sup>11</sup> These control zones were part of RENAMO military base establishments, where civilians were responsible for food production and the movement of supplies to and around the base. Control zones saw the highest level of regulation exerted over inhabitants, with 'tax zones' established for RENAMO combatants to collect goods contributions from the control zone population, while 'destruction zones' were those frequently attacked by RENAMO forces.<sup>12</sup>

The armed component of the rebellion consisted of the guerrillas themselves. Existing within a military structure, the guerrillas were the publicly visible element of the rebellion. In comparison to FRELIMO,

RENAMO was primarily a military organisation. The group established a centralised military hierarchy which was supported by the donation of a South African radio network, allowing the group to communicate and spread its cause. Led by Commander-in-chief Afonso Dhlakama, a 15-person military council was established, including a chief-of-staff each for the northern, central, and southern zones, supported by provincial commanders. Forces were further broken up throughout the provinces, to include regional command brigades, battalions, companies, platoons, and sections. This military approach was further supported by RENAMO's governance structure, which relied on minimal participation from civilians and non-combatants. This underlying administrative structure took into account the Mujeeba and other auxiliaries working to maintain societal calm.<sup>13</sup>

In cases of irregular warfare and rebellion uprising, the auxiliary provides support to the revolutionary movement by acting out the movement's methodology through often clandestine operations in order to achieve its operational goals.<sup>14</sup> This was demonstrated through the creation of the Mujeeba, an auxiliary group separated from the combatant groups, as an intelligence collection tool used against the population. The Mujeeba members were concealed and scattered amongst the population, gathering intelligence to help RENAMO identify supporters of and defectors from their cause.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the public component of a rebellion's structure was displayed through the unconcealed political narrative that underlies the movement.<sup>16</sup> The RENAMO developed a strategy, which was supported and communicated by a strong political narrative, to break down the government through two lines of effort: the first to cause carefully considered humiliation to FRELIMO; the second to systematically destroy infrastructure. The aim was to put the government in a position in which they either surrendered or entered power-sharing negotiations, an outcome which commenced in the early 1990's.<sup>17</sup>

Using these four well established arms, the rebellion was able to break down the legitimacy of the government resulting in the population losing faith in those in power. RENAMO did this through addressing perceived economic and developmental grievances.<sup>18</sup>

## Rhodesian Insurgency

Commencing in July 1964, the Rhodesian Insurgency lasted 15 years and saw the death of approximately 30,000 people. While civil violence in response to political frustration was not new to the region, the insurgency acted to overthrow governmental authority and change the existing social order. The conflict was sparked by the signing of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) which declared Rhodesia independent from Great Britain. This action, rejected by Black African leaders and many other countries throughout Africa, served as a stimulus for insurgent groups to take action against the Rhodesian Government.<sup>19</sup>

Collectively known as the Patriotic Front (PF), two African nationalist insurgent groups emerged. The Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU), the older of the nationalistic movements, with its armed component, the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), was supported by Soviet and Cuban advisors and encompassed a traditional military organisation. The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) was formed in 1963 by men who had left ZAPU. ZANU's armed component, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), was supported by the Chinese and took a more unconventional approach to operations. ZANU also established an overt political component through the establishment of a political officer role and developing close ties with the government of Mozambique, ensuring a strong narrative was publicly conveyed in an effort to support its military activities. While both groups were supporters of anti-Rhodesian sentiment, the groups' political and military objectives were often contradictory, a fact that the Rhodesian forces exploited until the two groups started coordinating military operations in the late 1970s.<sup>20</sup>

The opposing force, fighting for Rhodesia, was a conventional force that consisted of four Army components: the Selous Scouts, the African Rifles, the Special Air Service, and the Rhodesian Light Infantry. Conflict between the irregulars and the Rhodesian forces can be divided into three distinct periods, aligning somewhat with Maoist guerrilla warfare strategy:

**1965 – 1972:** This first period saw limited, uncoordinated attacks, which the Rhodesian Security Forces were able to overcome, rendering the insurgents' military and political objectives ineffective. During this period a small number of insurgents infiltrated Rhodesia and were easily overcome by a coalition of the Rhodesian Security Forces and South African police and paramilitary forces. In 1970 ZANU forces

became more organised, coordinating with resistance forces across the border in Mozambique, using the neighbouring nation as a staging base for operations, which were unsuccessful in achieving their objectives due to a series of Rhodesian SAS raids. During this period both ZANU and ZAPU struggled to establish effective political campaigns against the Rhodesian government.<sup>21</sup>

**1972 – 1976:** The second period saw an increase in organised insurgent military and political activity. While insurgent forces achieved some political objectives in border regions during this time, Rhodesian Security Forces inflicted a momentous number of casualties on the insurgent force. The start of this second period was marked by ZANLA insurgents conducting attacks close to the Mozambique border, the location saw much of the fighting in this period. Tactically, the insurgents had little success against the Rhodesian forces; however, ZANU had some success in meeting political objectives in local villages, using its political narrative to turn civilians against the government. In 1975 South Africa officially removed forces from Rhodesia and initiated a cease fire, which gave both sides of the conflict a chance to re-organise and expand their operations.<sup>22</sup>

**1976 – 1980:** As the insurgents increased political and military pressure on the government, the Rhodesian forces did have some tactical success. However, the third period saw the Rhodesian Government losing its political edge, including its control of the population. ZANLA staged a series of operations from Mozambique and Botswana, resulting in deaths on both sides. As Mozambique forces received increased aid from Soviet militaries, Rhodesian SAS forces carried out a number of raids in an attempt to interdict the flow of insurgent supplies, with varying success. By 1978 martial law had been imposed across much of rural Rhodesia, with the government unable to turn tactical superiority into success at the operational or strategic level. A year later, the United States, Britain, and South Africa pressured for a transitional government and imposed a Governor-General role. A ceasefire was agreed to by both sides on 28 December 1979 and elections took place in 1980. At this time, the ZANU party was elected and Robert Mugabe became the first Prime Minister of Zimbabwe.<sup>23</sup>

While both the Mozambique Civil War and the Rhodesian Insurgency provide what may first look like similar examples of irregular conflict within the same region, analysing the through the eyes of Maher's theoretical construct, the Triangle of Rebellion, it becomes apparent that while both conflicts can be explained through the contributing factors of organisation, relative deprivation, and competitive control, the ways in which conflicts spark are not uniform.

## **Strengths of the Theory**

In assessing the utility of the model through the lens of irregular conflicts in Africa, three key strengths of the model can be identified. The first is the concept of interconnectedness, the second organisation, and the third the identification of foreign support and influence.

### **Interconnectedness**

The overarching strength of the theory is that it ceasily conveys the interconnectedness of conflict. By structuring the tool in a way which presents three elements of a conflict as imperative prior to the ignition of war, it allows a researcher to identify these elements individually, and clearly map the interplay between them. In the case of the Rhodesian Insurgency, for example, organisation came in the form of the nationalist insurgents breaking into two groups, the ZANU and the ZAPU. Each of the groups formed an armed component, the ZAPU establishing the ZIPRA, which developed a hierarchical military governance style, and the ZANU establishing the ZANLA, which empowered its officers through their political relationship with the communist government of Mozambique.<sup>24</sup>

While the perceived relative deprivation presented in the form of race-based agricultural and land ownership legislation, competitive control came in the form of extensive political and economic sanctions placed on Rhodesia by foreign powers, which the insurgents viewed as the fault of the government. The conflict ignited in 1965 when then Prime Minister Ian Douglas Smith signed the unwanted and unsupported Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). This event perfectly represents the spark, as defined by the theory, that took the political conflict from one of a purely non-violent nature to one of open violence, which initially consisted of seemingly uncoordinated insurgent attacks.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the model demonstrates how each element builds upon the other. Without relative deprivation and competitive control, for example, the populace would have had no reason to rebel; and the key to success was the element of organisation, as without a strong structure an organisation would not have been able to react to the spark and ignite conflict.

### **Organisation**

Breaking down the structure of rebel or guerrilla groups can be quite complex, as actors in these groups may sometimes play multiple roles throughout the organisation or, in the case of the Rhodesian Insurgency, transition from one insurgent group (ZAPU) to the other (ZANU).

When applied to the case of the Mozambique Civil War, the theory allows for the easy identification of the four components which comprise a group's organisation. For example, the underground component is easy to identify when considering the establishment of the RENAMO's control, tax, and destruction zones, independently of other activities organised by the group.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the armed component of the group is readily identified due to its overt military activities, supported by a rigorous governance model, clearly delineating the roles of combatants from non-combatants, satisfying the parameters of the model.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the factor of competitive control explains the actions which captured the world's attention. Government methods implemented to suppress the population which capture the attention of an international audience help the researcher better understand foreign influences which may contribute to the sustainment of the irregular conflict.

### **Foreign Support and Influence**

In the case of Mozambique, it was first assumed that the rebelling force RENAMO existed with little to no outside support. However, when applying the Triangle of Rebellion, the researcher is able to strip away other factors and identify competitive control used by FRELIMO, through its socialist policies which saw land and agriculture removed from the people, captured the attention of outsiders and elicited financial support for the rebellion, thus perpetuating the conflict.

Originally supported by the South African military, the movement rapidly expanded. Moreover, as knowledge of the cause spread throughout the United States, a small collective of American ideological conservatives and businessmen began lobbying the US Government to support the group,

as well as providing them with field radios to aid communication throughout the groups established zones.<sup>28</sup>

The theory can also be used to track increases in funding towards the end of the conflict. As the government stated RENAMO activities were to cease while an agreement was being discussed, it is easy to see how some authors analysing the conflict conclude that international funding is what led to the war continuing past 1989, as the enhanced competitive control inspired overseas donors to continue supporting the rebelling force.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise in the Rhodesian conflict—which is arguably more complex due to the insurgents' Patriotic Front having two separate arms, ZAPU and ZANU, each with its own independent military component which did not always operate in support of the other—the researcher is able to focus in on this as a singular causal element.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, it is easy to identify Chinese influence through the supply of materiel and advice, which saw the group develop into one that organised itself around a narrative with a heavier reliance on political officers than on military ones—a point which will be revisited later in the paper.

The theory in its current form allows for easy identification of elements within a conflict that lead to the spark into open conflict, and enables a researcher to easily identify organisational elements of groups and to examine the impact and importance of international influence. However, the model does not explicitly demonstrate how each causal element is in direct proportion to the others, or if this is in fact the intention of the model.

## **Limitations of the Theory**

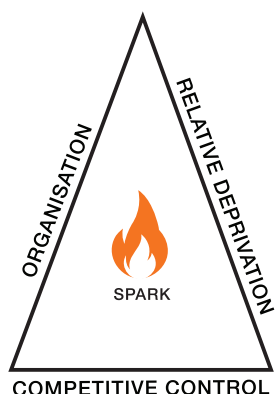
While the model provides a very clear and structured way to determine causal factors and analyse cases of irregular warfare, it appears to contain some limitations. Firstly, the model intimates that all elements are equal; indeed, little illumination is offered as to the relative weights of components that inform counter-insurgent prioritisation of effect. Secondly, it views the spark as one single event rather than the culmination of each of the factors together resulting in violent conflict. Moreover, it offers little insight to the counter-insurgent as to how big an event the spark needs to be to ignite rebellion.<sup>31</sup> How does one predict which events will result in such a response, and which ones will simply form additional data points to the perception of relative deprivation?

In the Mozambique case study, elements of relative deprivation and organisation appear to be quite strong. The grievances perceived by the majority of the population were clearly apparent, and furthermore were well co-opted by RENAMO's political narrative.<sup>32</sup> Expanding the model to view relative deprivation as a continuum (rather than a category) would allow researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the grievances felt by the population. For example, the lower end of the spectrum, shown in Figure 2 below, may involve reasonably banal perceived deprivations (such as the government being greedy or being envious of other nations) fueling thoughts of rebellion but not necessarily sparking it. Indicators of unrest may manifest in public discourse or proposed legislative changes. As the continuum progressed, legislative changes might occur, resulting in actual government intervention restricting a portion of the population with regards to education, economics, or land ownership. Thus the deprivation would transition from being perceived to being actual. In the case of Mozambique, as relative deprivation moved from relatively banal, perceived grievances, to the actual deprivation that impacted the lives and futures of the population, this culmination of elements sparked a violent response.



*Figure 2 – Continuum of Relative Deprivation from perceived to actual.*

The competitive control element of conflict was a far less prevalent factor in the Mozambique Civil War, as the FRELIMO did little to actively suppress the civilian population outside of their original political narrative. As such, it may be argued that, rather than an equilateral triangle, the Mozambique case study presents more as an isosceles triangle, in which the factors of organisation and relative deprivation are equal but competitive control is a less important causal factor.

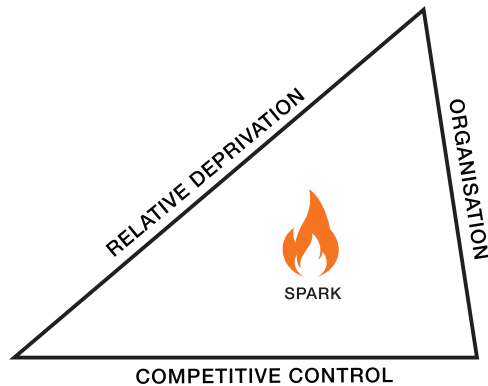


*Figure 3 – Resultant presentation of the Triangle of Rebellion showing different weightings of factors in the Mozambique Civil War*

Similarly, in the example of Southern Rhodesia, the weighting of the three factors may be argued as uneven and thus present as a scalene triangle, in which all sides are differently weighted. While the rebellion presented a less organised military structure than the government, it had a stronger political narrative, which ultimately contributed to its overall ability to sustain popular support. While militarily the Rhodesian government was strong, its strategic goal of unilateral independence did not align with the goals identified by other Southern African regional powers.<sup>33</sup>

The theory does not view the policy objectives as part of the organisational element. As mentioned previously in the theoretical explanation section of the paper, organisation is viewed as the physical structure and associated roles assigned to members of the rebellion. Nevertheless, the strategic objectives that a government or party seeks to achieve are imperative to their cause. The objectives provide a framework to organize around, with the policy in the forefront of the party's actions; it must then develop its underground, its armed component, its auxiliary, and its public component in support of this policy in order to achieve its political objectives.

This is why the African Patriotic Front, ZAPU and ZANU, despite at times having such conflicting operational and tactical approaches up to the late 1970s, were ultimately more successful. They pursued policies that were accepted by the majority and central to their organisation as a rebellion; however, the theory as it currently stands does not allow for organisation to be framed in this way.



*Figure 4 – Resultant presentation of the Triangle of Rebellion showing different weightings of factors in the Rhodesian Insurgency*

Due to a limited view of organisation in the current explanation of the model, the organisation side of the triangle appears to be the shortest of the three (Figure 4). Second to organisation is that of competitive control, which in Rhodesia came in the form of the Land Apportionment Act (1931), which saw the removal of 31 million acres outside of hunting reserves and a further 49 million acres within urban areas being removed from indigenous control and being made available for purchase only by white Africans and British colonists.<sup>34</sup> This perceived competitive control of the population outweighed the organisational element of the rebelling groups when fomenting the insurgency.

This side of the triangle is still shorter than that of relative deprivation which, in this case study, encompasses three major factors: employment, education, and access to land. Racial legislation dictating that African workers could not join trade unions and were precluded from skilled work programs despite holding qualifications marginalised the population, restricting them from better pay and working conditions. Likewise, education was segregated. The government directed more resources into the education of white children than of black and 'coloured' children. White children undertook a British-style curriculum and non-white children partook in trade skills through the primary system, with higher education not being available for this demographic until 1979. Finally, further grievances over land emerged throughout the population as the non-white African population continued to grow at higher rates than the white population, resulting in the available land reserves being too small to run a sufficient

number of cattle. This culmination of factors resulted in a strong sense of relative deprivation, more so than any other factor, which is diminished by the equal nature of the theory as it currently stands.

Finally, the theory views the spark which ignites the rebellion as a single catalyst for violence, however, in many conflicts no single event, clearly distinct from others, serve as a trigger for open armed conflict. For the Rhodesian Insurgency, Prime Minister Ian Douglas Smith's 1965 issuing of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence against the wishes of many Black African leaders, sparked a period of seemingly uncoordinated insurgent attacks.<sup>35</sup> While this case study perfectly supports the theoretical notion of a single event shifting a conflict from non-violence to violence, the single spark is not applicable to all conflicts. In the case of Mozambique, the country had already experienced years of war with a colonial power. Independence from Portugal was meant to be the answer to the perceived injustices, however, for many this was not the case. The civil war was the result of a dissatisfied population who had already endured much, coupled with a new government who promised to unite the people but failed to do so. The rebellion tipped over into violence when the insurgents had exhausted non-violent options.<sup>36</sup>

While both of these case studies can be viewed through the same conceptual lens, it is evident that a single sparking event is not a consistent way to explain the outbreak of conflict. When looking at previous case studies as exemplars for modern defence forces to learn from, it may be argued that this analysis reinforces the importance of looking at a situation holistically and taking into account both international (to the conflict zone—that being the government, forces, and civilian elements directly involved) and external factors (foreign interference or financing and other events occurring in the region) which may work together as slow burning elements to ignite a conflict.

## **Potential Sparks for Future Conflict in the Region**

In Mozambique, tension still exists between the FRELIMO party currently in power and the former rebel group which has since formed a legitimate opposition party. This existing tension continues to amplify a series of other tensions within the nation. In 2011, the discovery of gas fields off the coast of Mozambique was seen as the nation's chance to change

its economic future. However, the potential economic breakthrough has been overshadowed by political distrust and accusations of government corruption. This mistrust has been enhanced by the lack of unrestricted public debate. Media in Mozambique is composed of both government and private entities. Those who choose speak out against the government are subject to threats and intimidation, further contributing to the population's perception of government-exercised competitive control. Finally, the influx of ISIS insurgents into the country's north seeks to cause further instability in the political system and societal unrest, and brings into question the nation's ability to maintain its national security.<sup>37</sup> These factors of relative deprivation, which could easily again lead to the organisation of an internal disruptive force sparking violence to enact social change post-civil war, are not just being seen in Mozambique; Zimbabwe, too continues to see elements of unrest.

Post insurgency, Zimbabwe has been subject to poor environmental conditions, such as drought, leading to food shortages throughout the nation. With white-owned farm land being redistributed to black Zimbabweans, and with no land care or sustainable farming education taking place, there have been substantial falls in food production leading to prolonged feelings of relative deprivation. Moreover, President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was associated with some of the most heinous atrocities committed by the ZANU-PF Party, has pledged to boost foreign investment in the country. Finally, competitive control is felt by the populous with all media services owned by the government providing the main source of information throughout the country and those who speak against the official message being subject to intimidation and punishment.<sup>38</sup> While any one of these tensions could spark a conflict on its own, the complexities that come from the interplay of these events, when viewed holistically, could see policy changes that interconnect diplomatic reforms and military assistance to strengthen internal trust of the government and minimise the need for foreign military assistance within these countries.

## **A Policy Perspective**

The extant policy settings of the Department of Defence (Defence) as they apply to Africa can be seen in the Defence White Paper 2016 (DWP16) until July 2020.<sup>39</sup> The DWP16 dictates that Australia will continue to assist in responding to challenges to the rules-based order through peacekeeping

operations in Africa. Furthermore, key drivers such as the threat or rise of state-based terrorism from ungoverned parts of Africa—including the rise of Daesh and attempts to exploit fragile governments—will influence Australia's role in the region. Historically Australia has kept Africa at arm's length, which is further demonstrated by this current broad policy position.

The release of the 2020 Defence Strategic Update sets out the challenges to Australia's strategic environment and implications for Defence planning. The document focuses on Australia's near region, the strengthening of partnerships and engagements within the Indo-Pacific, and becoming a regional leader in the global community.<sup>40</sup> Within the 61-page document, there is not a single reference to Africa. While one may argue this to be an indication of Australia's level of interest or willingness to get involved in conflicts within that region, it may also be argued that there would be immense benefits for Australia in doing so, particularly in the form of meeting its own policy, military training, and intelligence objectives.

By once again using the Triangle of Rebellion to explain the conditions for violence which can be seen as developing in post-conflict Mozambique and Zimbabwe, Defence could adapt its policy settings to get ahead of the conflict and shape these nations through governmental mentorship, military and security force training, and controlled foreign investment programs.

Through governmental education initiatives, Australia could seek to take on a mentoring role within the region, providing governments with advice and tools to better strengthen their political narratives, such as presenting citizens with bipartisan initiatives which contribute to bettering national security. Through the use of diplomatic and defence attaché channels, relationships could then be enhanced practically through military and security partner training programs. Moreover, Australia could make moves to increase foreign aid to the region through its own foreign investment scheme, as well as publicly encouraging existing coalition partners to contribute. By showing Mozambique and Zimbabwe that Australia is financially invested in the region's progress, these countries may be less inclined to accept foreign funding from countries employing debt-trap diplomacy. An enhanced relationship and improved military engagements would not only benefit Mozambique and Zimbabwe, but also feed into the achievement of Australia's policy objectives within the region.

Through this relationship, Australia would be taking actions that would contribute to it becoming the security partner of choice in the region. By enhancing diplomatic and attaché ties, Australia would gain a much clearer picture of the political and societal positions of these countries. Moreover, through training of military and security forces, a beneficial information exchange would occur, particularly in relation to urban warfare environments. By building stronger relationships between police forces that operate in the urban environment and understand the civil dynamics in their area of command (including gangs or conflicting groups), and special operations forces, Australian forces would gain a better understanding of potential adversaries within the region. This clearer picture would also support the development of key intelligence networks, leading to enhanced organisation when countering threat forces (such as ISIS).<sup>41</sup>

While policy change on this scale is certainly not an easy feat, the reorientation of policy now would allow for planning to take place to position the Australian Defence Force in a forward-leaning stance should conflict occur in these nations in the future.

## Conclusion

The Triangle of Rebellion theory provides a researcher with a clear categorical framework through which to view a conflict. Generically the model speaks to the nature of war, which is enduring throughout conflicts. However, when applied to specific case studies such as the Mozambique Civil War and Rhodesian Insurgency, it struggles to take into account the unique character of these conflicts. The static nature of the model as it currently stands does not allow for different weights to be put on each of the elements as was seen throughout the aforementioned conflicts. Moreover, it struggles to account for conflicts that spark due to enduring competitive control and relative deprivation rather than a single event. The theory gives a researcher a strong frame around which a conflict can initially be understood. While looking at the model through the lens of the conflict may undermine the model's utility, it does allow for the systematic identification of factors which may lead to future conflict further allowing for the development of policy amendments in an effort to identify ways Australia could meaningfully contribute to future conflicts.

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## **A Challenge from Insurgency to the Nation-State: A Strategic Plan for Tunisia**

**Clarence Hovell**

Tunisia is challenged by a dual insurgency, with affiliates of al-Qaeda and ISIS exploiting grievances within the population and leveraging Islam to mobilise support. The objective of these affiliates is to discredit the Tunisian authorities and install a sharia-ruled government.<sup>1</sup> Tunisia's strategic partnership with Algeria has moderately suppressed a cross-border insurgency in Tunisia's west, although the insurgency still leads the contest for the control of the population. The strategic situation in Tunisia's east and with Libya is more concerning. Insurgents have established bases of support and are encouraging foreign fighters to Libya while also enabling attacks in Tunisia. The foreign fighter phenomenon, especially returning fighters, creates quite a specific complexity in Tunisia's strategic plans.<sup>2</sup> The government has responded with a state-focused security-centric strategy that leaves the population politically oppressed and deprived of socio-economic development, which intensifies the risk factors allied with insurgency.<sup>3</sup>

Tunisia's strategic plan to suppress insurgency must be population centric, and it must be accompanied by a narrative that targets the risk factors. It must address deprivation and build consensus to divide the insurgency from the population. That approach requires a reliable security sector, willing consideration of returning foreign fighters, equity-based socio-economic policies, and a normative system coupled with decentralised government control.<sup>4</sup> Not least, Tunisia requires foreign support to quell insurgency. To that end, part one of this paper will critically review the problem set and conclude that deprivation and grievance are major factors in the mobilisation of insurgency against the Tunisian authorities. Part two will

review the government's response and conclude that the current strategy has exacerbated grievance. The final part will propose and outline a population-centric plan underlined by five themes that represent plausible inclusions in domestic and foreign policy paramount in Tunisia's challenge against insurgency.

## Background

Tunisia's problem set encompasses social expectations, an assorted insurgency, and disaffected youth. Rebellion against the Ben Ali regime delivered the opportunity to end secularism and enhance Tunisia's socio-economic prospects. Nearly a decade of rule by a democratically elected government has only partially fulfilled the expectations of the Tunisian people. The population maintains a grievance over political repression, waning economic opportunity, and an unstable security environment perpetuating the risk factors associated with the mobilisation of an insurgency.<sup>5</sup> Through a separate lens, insurgent leaders are aggrieved at the failure of the authorities to install sharia post the rebellion—a factor in the insurgents' mobilisation and quite possibly a seam between components of the insurgency who mobilised more for material reasons and those who mobilised more for ideological grievances.<sup>6</sup>

Tunisia's situation is innately complex. It includes multiple actors and domains which induce domestic and regional pressures. The post-Arab Spring leniency toward ideologically motivated political organisations like Ansar al-Sharia (AST) was a miscalculation. AST's motives were a consequence of the political repression and polarisation of the Ben Ali regime. The regime's marginalisation of religious education and legislation of strict controls over mosques inadvertently promoted radical education. AST, acting as a vanguard, rallied against the new liberal Tunisian authorities and instigated violent protest and riots by exploiting perceptions of disrespect toward Islam.<sup>7</sup> AST also exploited local grievances and is credited by the population for providing social services and conflict resolution in regions where the Tunisian government was flagging. As a precursor to violence, AST was a factor in uniting radical and militant groups, and mobilising disenfranchised elements of society.<sup>8</sup> In Maoist terms, AST indoctrinated supporters to acquire a mass, and cultivated that mass to force a political decision.<sup>9</sup> The government decided on a security-centric strategy.

The AST strategy is nested with what Djallil Lounnas describes as the ‘Rise of Tunisian Jihad’. Lounnas outlines the ‘double pressure’ Tunisian authorities face from domestic jihadi organisations along with a much more dangerous foreign fighter problem. The role of political and jihadi Salafists in mobilising support should not be understated in that regard. They have cultivated Islamist narratives through engagement, reading materials, satellite television, blogs, and Facebook pages to recruit from disenfranchised sections of Tunisian society, including youth.<sup>10</sup> Mosques, schools, universities, social groups, and impoverished communities offer target-rich recruiting sites for Salafists. Such is the belief in Salafists that an estimated 30,000 people attended an annual Salafi congress in Kairouan in 2012.<sup>11</sup> The Tunisian government labeled AST a terrorist group the following year.

## **Extremism**

The foreign fighter phenomenon presents a significant challenge and creates additional risk for Tunisia’s security. By April of 2015 an estimated 12,000 Tunisians had attempted to leave to fight with ISIS in Iraq, Syria and Libya. Additional figures show that by July of 2015 up to 5,500 Tunisians—predominantly young men—had travelled to Syria.<sup>12</sup> Estimates conclude that returning foreign fighters numbered around 1,000 in early 2018, with the possibility that a further 500 fighters had returned undetected through Tunisia’s porous borders. There is likelihood that some returning fighters would prefer to strengthen ISIS-affiliated organisations in Libya and continue the jihad. The Libyan predicament has manifested in the assault on the Bardo Museum, shootings at Sousse, and the attack at the border town of Ben Guerden. Subversive in character, these attacks were perpetrated by insurgents against civilians, with coordinated support from underground cells in Ben Guerden and likely direction from Libya-based leadership.<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding the challenge of foreign fighters, domestic insurgent groups still pose a threat to authority. Domestic insurgents were buoyed by a climate for mobilisation, exposed to and exploiting the range of risk factors.<sup>14</sup> Matt Herbert describes the character of the threat in Tunisia’s western borderlands as a traditional insurgency.<sup>15</sup> It is akin to Robert Taber’s description of the flea that ‘survives by hopping and hiding’. It is distinct from the tactics of terror employed by ISIS affiliates in the state’s east.<sup>16</sup> This assessment considers the presence of the ISIS-affiliated Jund al-Khilafah-Tunisia (JAK-T) in the north-west. Both JAK-T and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) overtly target Tunisia’s security forces in

pursuit of their military and political objectives. Postured to exploit local grievances—such as limited economic resources, health, and education—JAK-T and AQIM have established a normative system of control.

To comprehend the insurgency in the western borderlands it is important to note that JAK-T and AQIM are armed components linked to a variation of the AST network likely located in neighboring Algeria.<sup>17</sup> The underground and auxiliary are cultivated from the base of support in Tunisia's north-west, with AQIM also focused on maintaining its base of support in Algeria, close to the Tunisian border. Crucially, there is no legitimate political opposition to the Tunisian government acting for JAK-T and AQIM. History shows that the likely spark for broader rebellion would come in the form of national protests. Cross-border insurgency presents a challenge to Tunisia's domestic security policy that has implications for its foreign policy and vice versa. To date, the Tunisian-Algerian strategic partnership to suppress cross-border insurgency has been moderately successful, although the insurgency is winning the competition for the control and support of the population. The return of foreign fighters can yet affect the strategic balance in the north-west.<sup>18</sup>

## **Disenfranchised Youth**

No less important in defining the problem set in Tunisia is understanding the role of disenfranchised youth. Their disaffection is explicitly linked to mobilisation based on a range of material and psychological grievances. Lounnas is adamant that disaffected youth represent the broad range of social classes, education standards, and economic strata. As there is no specific youth grievance or demographic, there can be no cure-all for youth mobilisation.<sup>19</sup> These statements are supported by George Joffe's observation that youth participated in the Arab Spring rebellion more on the basis of social betterment than subscription to the jihadi Salafists.<sup>20</sup> Regardless, there is a portion of Tunisia's youth who mobilised and whose ideals may be distinct from those of a wider demographic.

In the discourse of youth mobilisation, Isabel Schaefer posits that youth grievances are consistent with root causes of deprivation. By way of example, Schaefer notes the linkages between politics, economics, employment, and opportunity—meaning that while youth might be aggrieved at lack of employment opportunity, their social connections beget a deeper understanding of deprivation relative to others.<sup>21</sup> To that end, this part of

the paper confirms the proposition by Roger Trinquier that deprivation and grievance, no matter the scope, will be exploited to mobilise an insurgency.<sup>22</sup>

## Government Responses

The response by Tunisia's government to the challenge posed by insurgency has been security centric and the impacts of its policies have been variable.<sup>23</sup> Amnesty International has criticised Tunisia's government over legislative reform and the need to protect human rights. Specifically, Amnesty International has condemned authorities for reimposing the state of emergency, arguing that the provisions restrict 'freedoms of expression, association and movement'.<sup>24</sup> Dubbed S17, the border control measures were legislated to constrain persons under 35 years of age from travelling to Libya, Iraq and Syria. While the goal was to dissuade Tunisians from fighting abroad, the legislation impacted cross-border trade, depriving regional Tunisians of employment and prosperity.<sup>25</sup> Without economic support, regional Tunisians experience deprivation relative to other Tunisians and are at heightened risk of being mobilised into a component of an insurgency. This is quite specific in the case of Tunisia's youth, considering the linkages between politics, economics, and employment.

Herbert highlights that the emergency measures have provided wider powers to security forces.<sup>26</sup> This has had a positive impact on the Tunisian military, who experienced institutional deprivation under the Ben Ali regime. The military budget has been boosted and the force has been modernised. The US is noted as having contributed more than \$250 million in military aid. Additionally, the US is reported as providing foreign internal defence in support of the Tunisian authorities. The pay-off for the Tunisian authorities is the obligation to permit US basing in Tunisia in its fight against ISIS in Libya and abroad.

The paradox is that Tunisia's police have lost the level of institutional importance seen under the Ben Ali regime, generating a grievance.<sup>27</sup> Despite this, there is greater coordination between military and police effects. Yet there are three issues to consider. Firstly, the security forces are fighting disparate insurgencies in Tunisia's east and west. Therefore, institutional learning and adaption is paramount. Secondly, the security forces are centralised under national controls and deploy accordingly. John Nagl concludes that centralised forces are at a disadvantage, and that local forces are more successful in a counter-insurgency campaign.<sup>28</sup>

Thirdly, however, it is important to note Sharan Grewal's critical review of the Tunisian police unions and a continuance of police abuse and impunity incidental with the emergency provisions. In context, the security-centric approach is upheld at the cost of population support.<sup>29</sup>

In response to Libya's security vacuum the Tunisian government has militarised its eastern border. This measure also serves as a control for returning foreign fighters who want to remain undetected and avoid prosecution.<sup>30</sup> A key concern for the Tunisian authorities is the proximity of its population to insurgents residing in safe havens along the Tunisian-Libyan border. Additionally, there is pressure to protect oil and gas fields in the country's south. For the border towns there are concerns of fractured trading relationships and an influx of criminal groups who disrupt the security environment. Like the S17 provisions, militarising the border has had negative social impacts despite the plausible reasons for the physical constraints, not the least of which is poor diplomacy with Libyan officials. The government's oppressive security measures have turned essential cross-border trade into a black market.<sup>31</sup>

In response to the challenge from insurgency, Tunisia's government has replaced imams responsible for propagating jihadi ideology and banned affiliated organisations. The rhetoric of political and jihadi Salafists contributed to AST being designated a terrorist organisation, while incidentally the dissolution of AST compounded the foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Libya. Tunisia's Ministry of Religious Affairs runs a counter-narrative on a broad range of media and social platforms targeting youth and wider society.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Hamza Meddeb notes that Tunisia's authorities have adopted a policy of non-negotiation with returning foreign fighters—possibly a factor in fighters wanting to return undetected. Certainly a closed policy limits reintegration options and fosters grievance among family members.<sup>33</sup> Evidence suggests that Tunisia's prisons are already overcrowded, and the Tunisian authorities have limited capacity to reorientate from security-centric policy.<sup>34</sup> To that end, the current strategy has exacerbated deprivation and grievance, and Tunisia's government is losing the contest for the control and support of the population.

Insurgency poses a clear threat to the government's legitimacy. Insurgents exploit deprivation and grievance, real or perceived, and control the population through fear or services to garner support in the realisation of their own objectives. In response, Tunisia's strategic plan must be holistic

and population focused, and create a normative system of control that divides the insurgency. The division of the population from the insurgents is an indirect and effective strategy to suppress insurgency. It is a population-centric strategy, one designed to earn population support and give control to the authorities. Irregular warfare theorists, such as Taber, Trinquier and Nagl, subscribe to population-centric strategy as key to suppressing insurgency.<sup>35</sup> Division occurs in contest with the insurgency. Thus, it is termed competitive control. David Kilcullen's general theory of competitive control—a perception-based exchange—underpins the five-part thematic proposal to Tunisia's strategic plan.<sup>36</sup>

## **The Importance of Narratives**

A robust strategic plan requires a sustainable narrative. In that vein, a legitimate government, socio-economic prosperity, and a stable security environment are probable political objectives for Tunisia's government. Achieving these objectives requires clear policy, supporting legislation, and accountable action by the Tunisian authorities. The key narrative for domestic and international consumption is that the Tunisian government is a responsible democracy; an advocate for human rights; a government committed to political inclusion, social cooperation and a viable economy; and a strategic partner focused on population security and a stable security environment. The insurgency maintains the initiative if the narrative is weak or if the government fails to satiate the population through all means available. The narrative must withstand attempts to tarnish it as an extension of political oppression, and it must offer a proposition that targets the components of the insurgency at its seams. Importantly, the narrative needs to be backed by qualitative action to earn population support and give control to the authorities.<sup>37</sup>

Qualitative action in Tunisia's strategic plan must include security sector reform. Tunisia's security services are well supported by government spending and foreign aid. The focus should be the delivery of complementary effects to control the population and degrade underground and auxiliary support. Combined forces should be allocated to security districts as part of a strategy to provide localised security services, which includes the development of local policing that understands provincial nuances and cooperates with the local population to quell grievances. Importantly, trust is a currency, and idle reform of the police union presents

a significant risk to progressing legitimate claims of population security and earning support. The desired effect is population security delivered by the government in exchange for population support. These measures do not negate direct operations against insurgents; rather they enhance the reasoning for them and offer a counter-narrative to attacks by insurgents against civilians and the security services. The key decision rests in the balance of support and its potential for positive impact. The government's response must be seen to be enduring by both the population and the insurgency.

Intimate with population security is the development of new policy for returning foreign fighters. Of most importance is the need to detect returning fighters as a matter of preserving the perception of population security. A key decision for authorities is the implementation of a broad range of reintegration measures, lawful procedures, and assessments of the potential for de-radicalisation to stem unnecessary imprisonment. The requirement is corresponding domestic and foreign policy to reduce the burden on the judicial and prison systems, which will incidentally allow for additional focus on population security. There is opportunity for cooperation with religious moderates who support the government's counter-narrative. Equally, there is opportunity for community engagement to understand the diverse views on security to inform new legislation and policy. There is significant opportunity for youth inclusion to induce awareness of policymaking, not least inviting youth to take part in the political process. Foreign engagement is also vital. Engagement can enhance strategic partnerships, as has occurred between Tunisia and Algeria. Alternatively, third-party engagement, such as with NATO countries, can assist in diplomatic arrangements with Libya.

Government controls aligned to the strategic plan should be supported by socio-economic opportunity. The implementation of policy such as S17 and militarising the Tunisian-Libyan border should include economic relief packages such as infrastructure development, alternative employment, and tax relief. The aim is to limit deprivation, grievance and exploitable opportunity. There should be community engagement to understand grievances and improve the existing mechanisms for cross-border trade and departures. Social services should be extended to compete against insurgent-based services adding to the divide between the population and the insurgency. Again, youth inclusion is a significant opportunity. There are elements of social inclusion linked to security sector reform, such as social services in cooperation with local policing, highlighting the linkages across

domestic policy. There is substantial risk in developing policies which are too broad and fail on implementation or, more importantly, fail to meet the expectations of the population. Socio-economic inclusion requires a timely decision.

Decentralising some government control in Tunisia's strategic plan will bring immediate and longer-term reward to Tunisia. Certainly, decentralisation requires critical decision-making on the part of the Tunisian authorities to mitigate strategic risks. The implementation of decentralised control would likely be a progressive measure beginning with mechanisms linked to security sector reform, returning foreign fighters, local economic planning, and local social service initiatives. This strategy enables provincial authorities and local leaders to tailor solutions and alleviate grievances at a local level. It aims to deny insurgents the opportunity to mobilise through local grievances by providing 'a predictable, consistent, wide-spectrum normative system' trusted by the population.<sup>38</sup> Equally, this strategy offers a perception of transparency in government decision-making. Finally, the strategy seeks to legitimise the government's control measures across the broader state and reduce perceptions of a politically repressive government.

## **Conclusion**

In response to the challenge from insurgency the Tunisian government has implemented a security-centric plan. The population is beset with deprivation and grievance over government decisions which Amnesty International deems overly repressive. The 'double pressure' of insurgency highlights a complex problem set that requires complementary policy.<sup>39</sup> Security sector reform, policy renewal for returning foreign fighters, socio-economic inclusion, and decentralised government control, topped by a substantive strategic narrative and underpinned by population engagement, form a plausible strategic plan for Tunisia. If the government's political objective is recognition of its legitimacy, socio-economic prosperity and a stable security environment, then a shift in strategy from a security-centric plan to a population-centric plan is paramount. The Libyan predicament presents a significant foreign policy challenge. Domestic measures alone will not suppress insurgency. With a focus on population support and population control, the Tunisian government must implement a normative system of control and limit support to insurgency. People are the key in Tunisia's challenge from insurgency.

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## Endnotes

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# Why Women Conform: The South Sudanese Civil War as a Case Study for the Insecurity of Women as the Greatest Predictor of Rebellion

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## Introduction

Within academic scholarship on non-conventional warfare, there is a vast body of literature surrounding the political, economic and social precursors to violence. While scholars offer a wide range of theories as to which factors are the most accurate predictors of rebellion, there appears to be a notable absence of one of the most crucial components of state security—the role of women.

A consistent theme in titles such as *Why Men Rebel*<sup>1</sup> indicates the problem—scholars fail to acknowledge the impact of half the global population on matters of security. Using the case study of the South Sudanese civil war of 2013–2020, this paper aims to demonstrate that the greatest indicator of a future uprising is the insecurity of women. It will achieve this by first conducting a brief overview of the situation in South Sudan, with a specific focus on the gendered impacts of the conflict, to frame the problem.

After establishing the fundamental theoretical concepts that will underpin the analysis, this paper will conduct an overview of the existing body of research on indicators of a future insurgency. Specifically, it will introduce the concepts of Goldstone's four predictors of rebellion and the academic evolution that resulted in its reputation as one of the most accurate models of anticipating

insecurity. This paper will then apply a gendered lens to Goldstone's<sup>2</sup> model to demonstrate how the framework's utility in predicting civil unrest is strengthened through the deliberate consideration of women. Next, it will explore whether Maher's 'Triangle of Rebellion'<sup>3</sup> is applicable to the situation in South Sudan. Finally, it will draw on South Sudanese examples to caution against the inherent vulnerability of perpetuating a narrative in which men are considered to be the militarised providers for women and children in need of masculinised protection.<sup>4</sup> In conclusion, it will attempt to demonstrate that until the literature, legislation and military planning at all levels acknowledge and respond to the correlation between the insecurity of women and that of the state, true security will be impossible.

## Background

Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has experienced multiple insurgencies,<sup>5</sup> culminating in Africa's longest civil war.<sup>6</sup> Within two years of independence, President Salva Kiir accused his former deputy Riek Machar of attempting a coup d'état, igniting a civil war between the South Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SSPLM) and the South Sudanese People's Liberation Movement In Opposition (SSPLM-IO) that lasted until February 2020. In addition to the political tensions of the conflict, there were also ethnic undertones, with the two politicians representing the country's two largest ethnic groups, the Dinka (Kiir) and the Nuer (Machar).<sup>7</sup> It has been estimated that over 400,000 were killed<sup>8</sup> and millions displaced during the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Although South Sudan is a country rich in natural oil resources and the cultural history of 64 tribes,<sup>10</sup> the gendered impacts of the civil war have prompted many to describe South Sudan as one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman.<sup>11</sup> Sexual violence, predominately perpetrated against women and girls by men, was utilised as an integral component of the war strategy for the purposes of ethnic cleansing, humiliation and revenge.<sup>12</sup> It has been estimated that in 2016, 70 per cent of women living in internally displaced camps had been raped, with the majority of the perpetrators being soldiers and members of the police service.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to significant levels of gender-based violence, women and girls faced high rates of child and forced marriages, maternal mortality and a disparate level of education compared to their male counterparts.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, despite the existence of a recognised currency, the traditional cattle economy endured as a significant marker of social status and wealth.<sup>15</sup> As such, the requirement to pay a bride price and the associated reduction in a woman's value after sexual assault<sup>16</sup> reinforced the commodification of women and the intrinsic link between their ownership and state security.

## **Theoretical Grounding and Conceptual Clarification**

After discussing the impacts of South Sudan's culture and conflict on the security of women, this paper will now demonstrate that the pervasive insecurity of women was not just a crucial predictor of rebellion but a key component in its eventual scale and intensity.

Traditional models of predicting rebellion disproportionately focus on economic development as a driver of irregular warfare.<sup>17</sup> In response to this, Goldstone<sup>18</sup> proposed a model which claimed to predict the instability of a state with over 80 per cent accuracy using four factors. These are infant mortality, the presence of armed conflict in four or more bordering states, regime type, and the presence of state-led discrimination.

As a case study, the South Sudanese civil war meets all four of these factors. Infant mortality during this period was one of the worst in the world, with 70 deaths per 1,000 live births registered in 2013.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, South Sudan is a landlocked country and armed conflict was present in all six of its neighbouring states over the period of the civil war, with widespread state-led discrimination being a significant driver of its independence from Sudan.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the most powerful predictor of instability onsets as per the Goldstone model, is regime type, with fully autocratic states being the most likely to resort to violence. This concept of full autocracy refers to 'systems that combine an absence of effective contestation for chief executive with repressed or suppressed political participation',<sup>21</sup> which is an accurate description of the regime type during the civil war.

While Goldstone's model rings true in predicting the likelihood of instability events for South Sudan, it is the position of this paper that an even greater predictor of rebellion can be found in a state's treatment of women. Structural violence including rape, sexual violence, abduction, sexual slavery, sexual mutilation and sexual torture have all been consistent features of South Sudan's conflict, which has continued unabated despite two separate

attempts at peace since 2013.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, according to the WomanStats Project<sup>23</sup> the country had some of the most concerning statistics in relation to the physical security of women, son sex preference, trafficking of females, maternal mortality, discrepancy in education, and lack of governmental participation of women. This data supports a growing body of research which asserts that 'values behind unequal gendered roles and power relations are instrumental in building support for and perpetuating conflict'. Furthermore, there is a direct correlation between levels of conflict and gender inequality, as well as an emerging association between gender-based violence and conflict.<sup>24</sup> This has been strongly supported by Hudson et al. in *Sex and World Peace*, whose research asserts that if a policymaker or scholar had a choice between four variables (level of democracy, level of wealth, prevalence of Islamic culture or the physical security of women) to predict which would be of most concern to the international community, the most accurate predictor would be the physical security of women.<sup>25</sup>

## The Triangle of Rebellion

Having understood the academic literature that underpins security studies, this paper will now offer an analysis of how an acknowledgement of the insecurity of women can strengthen models that predict the likelihood of a rebellion. Furthermore, it will show that the high prevalence of gender-based violence in South Sudan, and the association between the state's treatment of women and normalising violence, exacerbated the fragile political climate and increased the scale and intensity of the conflict.

The 'Triangle of Rebellion' as proposed by Maher<sup>26</sup> hypothesises that—similar to the fire triangle theory, in which the presence of fuel, heat and oxygen is required to create a fire—the ignition of rebellion required three key elements. These are relative deprivation, organisation, and competitive control.<sup>27</sup> Recent research on the fire triangle has proposed the addition of a fourth element: the chemical chain reaction required to produce sufficient exothermic energy to commence ignition and sustain a fire.<sup>28</sup>

It is the position of this paper that as a case study the South Sudanese civil war supports the Triangle of Rebellion hypothesis to an extent. However, it expands on Maher's position and suggests that the hypothesis could also be strengthened through the addition of a fourth element:

the systemic insecurity of women as an intrinsic and vital precursor to rebellions. To illustrate this, each of Maher's three elements will be analysed alongside the situation in South Sudan, followed by discussion of how each was exacerbated by the disproportionate impact of the conflict on women.

## **Relative Deprivation**

Relative deprivation, as defined by Gurr,<sup>29</sup> relates to the perceived discrepancy between an individual's or group's expectations regarding the goods and conditions they believe they are rightfully entitled to, compared to their lived experience. As a theoretical concept, the presence of 'subjective expectations of objective probabilities'<sup>30</sup> distinguishes it from feelings of deserved or legitimate disadvantage. It is further asserted that there is a strong correlation between the relative deprivation of a population and structural violence as a precursor to political unrest.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, research conducted by Pound et al. found that 'evidence indicates that relative deprivation (as indexed by income inequality) is typically a more powerful predictor of variation in male violence than other socioeconomic measures such as percent below the poverty line or average income'.<sup>32</sup>

In the South Sudanese civil war, a number of factors contributed to the fragile and unstable political climate. Economically, the country's reliance on cash crops and finite oil revenue, in conjunction with cyclical violence and seasonal cattle raiding, put the general population at increased likelihood of financial insecurity. Politically, recent independence after decades of civil unrest under the government of Sudan created a perceived hope that the situation would improve. All of these contributed to the ideal conditions for relative deprivation to act as a precursor to civil unrest.

The application of a gender lens serves to illuminate additional sources of insecurity. South Sudan is a patrilocal bridewealth society in which women are inherited into their husbands' tribes upon receipt of a dowry, or 'bride price', thus guaranteeing that all men within a clan are kin, alleviating the genetic concerns of inbreeding and mitigating in-group conflict.<sup>33</sup> Marrying across clan lines can also serve to strengthen relations with neighbouring tribes, which can act as a force multiplier in a country as ethnically diverse as South Sudan.

Strategically, this was best demonstrated in the case of Chief Majak

Malok Akot, who famously married 76 wives across all clan lines as a method of ensuring intercommunal security within his village.<sup>34</sup> While this practice confers significant advantage to a group's survival, it comes at a disproportionate cost to its female members, who in environments of limited resources are much more likely to experience differential feeding practices, access to health care and access to education.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore the position of women within South Sudanese society was one of relative deprivation not only in relation to their male counterparts but also in relation to other comparable communities. Additionally, while men also experienced relative deprivation, it can be asserted that the impact of bride price, the reliance of women on their male counterparts for economic security, and less access to health care and education resulted in women experiencing relative deprivation at a higher rate than men.

## **Competitive Control**

Competitive control in the context of the Triangle of Rebellion operates on a continuum; it can relate to a lack of access to legal rights and legitimate avenues for expressing grievance, up to and including genocide.<sup>36</sup> More importantly, as an agent in perpetuating the likelihood of rebellion, it serves to desensitise a population to violence.

The situation in South Sudan during the civil war was unequivocally one of a suppressed state. A lack of accountability for and by military and law enforcement agents resulted in a society of impunity and one in which violence became the universal commodity. This was further exacerbated by the censorship of media outlets and the presence of a constitution which did not guarantee human rights of free speech. An example of this was observed in 2014 when President Kiir claimed that media coverage of his private life was in violation of the constitution and forbade its coverage by journalists.<sup>37</sup> By 2016, during what could be argued to be one of the most contentious chapters of the civil war, South Sudan was ranked 141 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index.<sup>38</sup>

The consequences of these destabilising events disproportionately affected women in many ways. Legally, a lack of representation at all levels of government and the systemic perpetration of gender-based violence

resulted in most survivors being reticent to report, and even less likely to receive a fair judicial outcome.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, women faced additional layers of suppression due to the honour shame society that operated within South Sudan. The commodification of women, and their fluctuating value based on sexual purity, encouraged the stigmatisation of victims of sexual assault while also promoting practices which assured the virgin status of daughters, such as reduced access to education in which male teachers held the majority of positions, and the arrangement of child marriages prior to the onset of puberty.<sup>40</sup>

These structural inequalities became crucial vulnerabilities during the civil war, whereby the targeted sexual attack on female civilians by uniformed combatants was used as a weapon of war.<sup>41</sup> In societies such as South Sudan, the target of rape was not women or sexual desire; rape was a crime of power against men and families. In the words of Hudson et al., 'rape shows that men could not protect the chastity of their women ... and strips honour from a family'.<sup>42</sup> The resulting stigmatisation of survivors further suppressed the voices of women, increasing their exposure to sexually transmitted infection and unwanted pregnancy and reducing their future economic potential. Consistent suppression of women served to reinforce a narrative that provided an opportunity for rebellion to flourish as groups perpetuated retaliatory attacks and further embedded a culture of structural inequality. This therefore further identifies the competitive control of women as a particularly useful indicator for the identification of precursors to a rebellion.

## Organisation

An insurgent organisation, as defined by Staniland, 'is a group of individuals ... that uses a name to designate itself, is made up of formal structures of command and control and intends to seize political power using violence.'<sup>43</sup> By definition, each of the insurgent organisations within South Sudan fits the classification of a parochial group, with fragile central processes of control, robust local processes of control, and the nature of dissent residing between factional commanders.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly to what was previously mentioned under the umbrella of competitive control, gang rape was also used as a tactic between insurgent organisations, due to most military forces remaining heavily aligned to a

particular tribal faction. The result of this during the South Sudanese civil war was categorised by Pinaud<sup>45</sup> as 'genocidal rape', in which uniformed perpetrators carefully selected their victims based on ethnicity and the act was assigned, supervised and endorsed by commanders. The military outcomes achieved by such attacks were varied; they included encouraging cohesion in mixed tribal units, as well as the murder, displacement, dehumanisation and moral and physical destruction of target groups. Additionally, the systemic rape of an entire village significantly decreased its bridewealth capacity, reconfiguring the regional social order.<sup>46</sup>

As has been demonstrated, while the presence of all three factors of Maher's Triangle of Rebellion were undeniably present, the overall scale and duration of the civil war was exacerbated by the structural inequalities facing the women of South Sudan. Furthermore, this illustrates that while the ignition of a rebellion is still possible without this element, the disproportionate levels of insecurity faced by women is a crucial factor in intense and sustained conflict.

## **A Fourth Element to Rebellion**

As this paper has demonstrated, the insecurity of women within South Sudan during the civil war permeated every level of society and significantly contributed to the scale and intensity of the conflict. It has been the intention of this paper to further highlight the significant lack of academic scholarship that focuses on the insecurity of women as a predictor of rebellion, and to encourage that this be a mainstreamed practice in security studies.

However, in doing so, it is equally important to acknowledge that women's participation during conflict occurs along a continuum in the same way as it does for male combatants. To this end, this section of the paper hopes to challenge the gendered bias that pervades the literature on security studies and perpetuates the narrative of a male combatant and female victimhood.

As was demonstrated in the example of Chief Majak Malok Akot and his 76 wives, the role of women as intercommunal bridges serves to reinforce the importance of considering all actors, both passive and active, in matters of insecurity. A rare but profound example of women as active participants in a South Sudanese conflict involved a case of intercommunal violence known as the Lou-Jikany wars, in which the older women of a tribal

faction instructed the single, unmarried women to stand behind frontline soldiers during the advance so that deserters would be shamed if they considered retreat.<sup>47</sup>

Additionally, women had a role to play in perpetuating narratives of masculinity that encouraged violence and gendered social norms, as is evidenced in the lyrics of war songs which glorify bravery, reinforce the need for a father's permission prior to marriage, and caution women against choosing a bad husband. Examples of translated lyrics include, 'If your father is not respected, you will be like him'<sup>48</sup> and 'Lord hear the prayers of women, they are the ones who give birth to Kings'.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, women are key drivers in encouraging marriage practices that include abduction and violence. Bride kidnapping, or marriage by abduction, a practice most common in pastoralist communities in South Sudan, involves a man forcefully taking a woman (or, in many cases, a girl) from her home to demonstrate his intent to marry. Women are encouraged to fight back. After the abduction is complete the intended groom, accompanied by male members of his family, returns her to her parents to negotiate a bride price.<sup>50</sup> Notions of masculinity associated with the practice can be anecdotally evidenced by the explanation provided during an interview that 'if I can't trust a man to abduct me, I can't trust him to protect me'.<sup>51</sup> The requirement for cattle to be a non-negotiable component of a bride price drives many men to resort to cattle raiding to be able to afford the expected dowry, which in turn fuels the cycle of retaliatory violence and revenge killings in South Sudan.<sup>52</sup>

It is both a limitation and an opportunity of this paper that the South Sudanese civil war provides an extreme example of gendered roles during a conflict in which women were the vast majority of both non-combatants and casualties, with men as the predominant participants. However, what has also been made clear is that even with their limited active involvement, women made a significant contribution to military outcomes. This is a trend that is not isolated to South Sudan, and it acts as a model to demonstrate that the insecurity of women is a fundamental predictor of rebellion globally. Other examples of the roles women have played in irregular warfare can be found in their involvement in cadres during Nepal's Maoist Rebellion,<sup>53</sup> the roles of female recruits in ISIS<sup>54</sup> and the impact of female Mayors in Columbia in reducing guerrilla attacks,<sup>55</sup> to name a few.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence presented in this paper offers a case study through which predictors of rebellion can be better understood. Through its assessment of two prominent theoretical frameworks, several conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. The first is that structural inequalities in social factors such as gender and clan line are powerful indicators of precursors to violence and are closely related to the scale and intensity of a conflict. Additionally, even in contexts in which women are not active participants in a conflict, they can have an influential role in enforcing gender norms, desensitising a population to violence and promoting notions of masculinity. Finally, this paper provides a context in which the literature of two important but generally separate fields—that of the relationship between gender and insecurity, and that of predictors of rebellion—can be combined to strengthen the existing framework.

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## Author Biographies

### Brooke Barling

Brooke Barling is currently undertaking the Master of Special Operations and Irregular Warfare program at UNSW@ADFA. In addition to her current academic undertaking, Brooke holds a Bachelor of Social Science (with Majors in Psychology and Forensic Science), and an Honours degree in International Relations. Outside of academics, Brooke undertakes the role of Deputy Director Maritime Domain Support Office in Navy Headquarters. Moreover, she holds a seat on the Board of Directors at Pegasus Riding for the Disabled - ACT, where she is a volunteer coach instructing people with disabilities as they undertake equine based therapy programs.

### Steph Costa

Steph Costa is a Captain in the Australian Army who has previously deployed to South Sudan. She is completing a Masters in Strategy and Security and has a particular interest in the relationship between gender and violence and how implementing a gender perspective can enhance security outcomes.

## **Clarence Hovell**

Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Hovell is an Australian Army Infantry Officer, a graduate of the Australian Command and Staff College, and formerly the Commanding Officer of Combat Training Centre – Live where he was responsible for improving the performance of Army's largest teams through immersion in the Decisive Action Training Environment. Lieutenant Colonel Hovell has a Master of Military and Defence Studies from the Australia National University and a Master of Strategy and Security from the University of New South Wales. Lieutenant Colonel Hovell has served on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and he has a particular interest in Irregular Warfare.

## **Andrew Maher**

Andrew Maher is a Major in the Australian Regular Army with a particular interest in operations conducted by, with and through foreign forces. He has served in Afghanistan and Iraq and is currently a military fellow, lecturer and doctoral candidate with the University of New South Wales, Canberra. He is a course convenor for subjects on Irregular Warfare and the Theory of Special Operations with UNSW Canberra, a Non-Resident Fellow with the Modern War Institute at West Point and is a Chief of Army Scholar in 2021.

## **Christopher Webb**

Christopher Webb is a Major in the Australian Regular Army, with a particular interest in Signals Intelligence and Information Warfare. He has served in East Timor and Iraq, as well as on various other multinational operations, exercises and engagements. MAJ Webb is attending the Australian Command and Staff Course in 2021, and has completed a Masters of Military and Defence Studies at the Australian National University. MAJ Webb is currently studying a Masters in Strategy, Cybersecurity, and Diplomacy from the University of New South Wales.

